

Israel and Palestine

Painfully aware of the urgent need for the churches to move from affirmation to action in solidarity with the Palestinian people at this critical time, 50 participants at an international ecumenical consultation on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict have identified seven potential areas for coordinated action as a beginning of a joint process of ecumenical planning and strategizing for a concerted international response.

The 6-7 August 2001 consultation on the Israeli-Palestinian issue was convened by the World Council of Churches (WCC) general secretary at the Ecumenical Centre, Geneva. The moderator of the WCC Central Committee co-chaired the sessions. Building on long-standing WCC attention to the Palestinian question, the consultation's aim was to strengthen broad international ecumenical support for a comprehensive peace, based on justice and security for the Palestinian and Israeli people.

WCC general secretary Rev. Dr Konrad Raiser noted at the conclusion of the meeting that the exchange of ideas was important in "beginning to identify where the particular dynamics, urge and competence for action lie among us". He drew particular attention to the recommendations contained in a report released on 6 August of an end-June WCC delegation visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), saying that they would also help guide decisions on appropriate action.

Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal of the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East, the preacher at the consultation's opening worship, declared: "Thank God Jesus said 'Blessed are the peacemakers.' He did not say 'Blessed are the peace-talkers.'... Peace, as all of you know, is not the absence of war nor the cessation of hostilities. Peace is that relationship between the so-called enemies, from which all the causes that made for war are no more. Making peace requires greater courage than going to war." Following this injunction, consultation participants declined to draft a concluding communiqué in the form of a public statement. "Action is not another statement, no matter how dramatic," Raiser affirmed. "We need to map out a way for us to actually work together."

Decisions

The main outcome of the consultation was the decision to form a small consultative group to develop realistic proposals for action with local and international partners in seven areas:

- coordinating advocacy with governments
- boycotting goods produced in Israeli settlements in the occupied territories
- strengthening the "chain of solidarity" through prayer vigils

- resisting the destruction of property and uprooting of people from their homes and land
- encouraging and enabling the presence of ecumenical monitoring teams
- improving communication, interpretation and media reporting on the conflict and its causes
- increasing church, ecumenical, and interreligious delegations to and from Israel and the OPT.

It was also agreed that, together with the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) and local churches, the WCC will develop a coordination point for ecumenical action in Jerusalem, and explore the possibility of linking it with an international coordination centre.

Picking up on a recommendation of the visiting delegation, it was agreed to propose to the WCC Executive Committee meeting 11-14 September that it consider a special focus on “ending the violence of occupation in Palestine” in the framework of the Decade to Overcome Violence, and possibly to call for an international conference on the subject. As Jean Zaru of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre in Jerusalem noted, “Occupation is violence, and in the Decade to Overcome Violence, we have to expose the structural violence of occupation.”

The specific contribution to peace and reconciliation of churches and religious communities was emphasized throughout the consultation. “Being members and representatives of faith communities entails a commitment to a basic moral, ethical stance, to an integrity of the rights approach... that we hope will rescue the conflict from becoming totally embroiled in a pure power struggle,” Raiser noted in his concluding remarks.

Sharing

Participants shared news on local and international initiatives being planned or underway related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. They also heard from a representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms Darka Topali, who reported on actions and mechanisms in relation to human rights in Israel and the OPT.

In addition, Professor John Dugard, chairperson of the Human Rights Inquiry Commission and newly-appointed Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied since 1967, reviewed his mandate and emphasized the unique legal environment in which human rights violations in the context of military occupation are addressed.

Professor Richard Falk, a member of the Human Rights Inquiry Commission, summarized the findings and recommendations of the Commission. Respect for existing human rights and humanitarian legal norms, he said, needs to be part of and not an outcome of the peace process.

Consultation participants included moderators and members of the WCC governing and advisory bodies, Jerusalem church leaders, representatives of WCC member churches and ecumenical partners from around the world, and a selected number of partners working on peace initiatives in Israel and the OPT. The permanent observer of the Holy See to the UN office in Geneva also participated in the session. Several Palestinian participants were unable to attend due to travel restrictions imposed by the Israeli government.

Summing up the value of the meeting, WCC Central Committee member Bishop Aldo Etchegoyen of the Evangelical Methodist Church of Argentina said: "Many people have lost hope in this moment. Many people think peace is impossible. Hope is necessary because this is more than a programme, this is our commitment in favour of life, justice, peace and people."

Photos are available through Photo Oikumene on
<http://wcc-coe.org/photo/events/events.html>

International Ecumenical Consultation on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict Convened by the World Council of Churches 6-7 August, 2001, Geneva, Switzerland

WACC member Ashtar Theatre in Ramallah, Palestinian Authority, produce an informative newsletter which gives firsthand flavour of the ongoing Intifada now in its 11th month. The newsletter is available by e-mail: contact ashtar@p-ol.com