

Christian Leaders Urge Churches to Back Syria Peace Plan

The World Council of Churches (WCC) urged its Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican member churches on Thursday to lobby their congregations and national governments to support a political solution to the **war in Syria**.

The Geneva-based WCC made the appeal after a meeting with international envoy for Syria Lakhdar Brahimi and former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who both asked Christian leaders to help mobilize public opinion for peace.

The appeal by the WCC, representing about a quarter of the world's 2.2 billion Christians, follows similar calls by the Roman Catholic Church—which makes up over half of global Christianity—and many **evangelical leaders**.

“Churches must continue to raise their voice in their congregations and with their governments,” said a WCC communique after the meeting near Geneva on Wednesday.

“We must strengthen the public outcry so that those in power will protect the common interest of humanity.”

WCC General Secretary Rev. Olaf Fyske Tveit told Reuters there was “consensus in the whole Christian family” for a negotiated peace in Syria and Brahimi and Annan convinced church leaders it could happen “if there is enough political support.”

He noted that even many United States **evangelicals**, who mostly backed earlier U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, had spoken out against military strikes in Syria after a poison gas attack outside Damascus killed hundreds of people.

“I’ve seen no Christian leader voice support for those

strikes,” Tveit said. “The time has passed when anyone believed that one side could win. The only way forward is to support the political solution.”

Go Beyond ‘No War’

A deal to remove Syria’s chemical weapons averted the looming prospect of a U.S. military strike, but international mediation since then has not yet been able to agree on opening so-called “Geneva 2” peace talks.

The WCC communique urged the United Nations Security Council to set a date for peace talks and take steps to de-escalate the conflict, including an arms embargo and measures to stop the flow of foreign combatants into **Syria**.

It also urged full access for humanitarian aid by church-related relief agencies in Syria and among refugees in neighboring countries.

Tveit said Brahimi urged church leaders to help “mobilize for a common understanding of the need for a political process” and Annan asked them to spread the message to “go beyond ‘not go to war’ but build peace.”

Churches have already been active in several countries in opposing the war in Syria, where the local Christian minority has come under attack from Islamist militants and many have fled abroad.

At the Vatican, **Pope Francis** led Roman Catholics in a worldwide day of prayer on September 7 for peace in Syria.

In Britain, where parliament voted against joining any military strikes, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby warned the government against “rushing to judgment” and taking steps that could have unforeseeable consequences in the Muslim world.

Leith Anderson, president of the influential U.S. National

Association of Evangelicals, said: “Most of our leaders think military action against Syria is the wrong way to go.”

Geoff Tunicliffe, Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance, said Christian leaders in the Middle East agreed that “any military intervention by the United States will have a detrimental effect on the situation, and in particular for Christians in Syria.”

Russian Orthodox Also Active

Metropolitan Hilarion, foreign minister of the Russian Orthodox Church, said U.S. church leaders “can play a special role because they can influence the institutions of American government and the president.”

Hilarion, who also took part in the WCC meeting, told Reuters Moscow’s support for the **Syrian government** was not an issue at the meeting because all church leaders present “were unanimous with regards to the inadmissibility of air strikes.”

He said the Moscow Patriarchate’s position coincided with Russian policy, which he described as support for the Damascus government but not for President **Bashar al-Assad** specifically, but he was there representing his church.

Leaders of six Orthodox and Catholic churches in Syria also attended the meeting, as did representatives of the Church of England, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and two U.S. Protestant churches—Church of the Brethren and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)—active in peace efforts.

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