

# Churches join forces to halt Gulf slaughter

by Kathleen Klenetsky

Churches across the globe have redoubled their efforts to bring the Persian Gulf war to an end, following the brutal slaughter of innocent Iraqi civilians by U.S.-led coalition forces.

Pope John Paul II's insistent pleas for an end to the bloodshed have been joined in recent weeks by leading Protestant and Orthodox churchmen representing a wide variety of denominations in nearly every country of the world.

At the World Council of Churches (WCC) seventh assembly, which took place in Canberra, Australia, Feb. 7-20, the issue of the war dominated the agenda. A statement on the conflict and "the threat to world peace" was voted up by the assembly on its final day, despite efforts by the Church of England to sabotage the anti-war move.

The statement is a strongly worded warning that the Gulf war "is a war of ominous and unforeseeable dimensions," which, if not immediately stopped, "threatens the destruction of the land and people it seeks to liberate." Calling "urgently and insistently" on both Iraq and the U.S. for an immediate cease-fire, the WCC statement demands that the United Nations "act decisively now" to end the war.

Among its specific recommendations, the statement urges a U.N.-convened "international conference on peace, security, and cooperation in the Middle East," and calls for compliance with existing U.N. resolutions calling for an end to the illegal occupation of territory in the Mideast, including the Israeli Occupied Territories.

Additionally, it demands that all foreign military forces be withdrawn from the Middle East, except for U.N. peacekeeping forces, and appeals to Iraq to signal its intention to withdraw "completely and unconditionally" from Kuwait after hostilities cease.

## 'Sin against the Lord'

The statement reflects the near-universal condemnation of Bush's war expressed by delegates to the WCC meet. In contrast to the Bush administration's blasphemous insistence that Operation Desert Storm is a holy war smiled upon by the Almighty, Gunter Krusche, of the German Federation of Evangelical Churches, bluntly told a special WCC session on the Mideast conflict Feb. 12, "Let's have the courage to

call the war what it is: sin and sinning against the Lord."

Those sentiments were echoed by numerous other participants, among them Aram Keshishian, the Armenian Apostolic Archbishop from Lebanon, who charged that the conflict was neither a just nor a holy war, and called for an unconditional cease-fire, and Adebisi Sowunmi of the Church of Nigeria, who declared, "This war is neither just nor holy, and amounts to a heretical myth."

The National Council of Churches (NCC), a U.S.-based group which belongs to the WCC and represents nearly 50 million Christians, released its own statement on the Gulf conflict Feb. 14 simultaneously in Canberra and New York. The statement urges an immediate cease-fire and a "fresh effort to find a diplomatic solution" to the crisis.

The U.S. is in "a war that should have been avoided," the statement declares, adding that the fighting will produce "no winners," but instead will "unleash violence that would only multiply and reverberate" for generations. "The words of the Gospel cannot be reconciled with what is now happening in the Gulf. It is on Jesus' call to be peacemakers that we are united and will take our stand."

The declaration is the first collective statement against the war to come out of the NCC since hostilities began on Jan. 17. Signers represent a wide array of denominations, including the United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Orthodox Church in America, American Baptist Church, and Episcopal Church—Bush's denomination. Also signing were the leaders of five largely black denominations, reflecting the intense opposition to the war in the black community, as well as 15 Roman Catholic bishops and other clergymen.

The churches are situating themselves to become a vehicle for the creation of an anti-war resistance movement. The NCC statement, for example, calls on Christians to "build a disciplined, morally based nonviolent movement in response to the war," and urges the churches to "offer support and assistance to conscientious objectors who are refusing military service" and "to those who cannot obey military orders that conflict with the church's teachings on the sacredness of human life."

On Feb. 15, a group of black civic and religious leaders held a leadership summit at the Abyssinian Church in Harlem in New York City, where they laid out plans for mobilizing the black community against the war. The group called on the 65,000 black churches in the U.S. to offer sanctuary to war resisters, and to offer counseling to those who seek to be recognized as conscientious objectors.

The summit, whose participants included Coretta Scott King, the Rev. Joseph Lowry, Rep. Major Owens (D-N.Y.), and the Rev. Benjamin Chavis, head of the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ, also sent a letter to President Bush calling the war immoral and demanding that he declare a cease-fire in response to the recent Iraqi peace overture.