

Leaders of Pakistan diocese condemn US, Israeli military actions

FAISALABAD, Pakistan – Church leaders in eastern Pakistan have demanded an end to American military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq and the Israeli attack on Gaza.

“The church strongly condemns the unjust and merciless attacks by the imperialist Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as Israel’s increasingly cruel and tyrannical aggression on Palestine,” Father Aftab James Paul said at a press conference Jan. 5. Bishop Joseph Coutts of Faisalabad and two other priests accompanied him as he read a statement, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

Father Paul is director of Faisalabad Diocese’s Commission for Interfaith Dialogue. It and the diocesan justice and peace commission organized the press conference in Faisalabad, 150 miles south of Islamabad.

“We appeal to the Organization of the Islamic Conference to raise its voice against the tyrannical and despotic forces. We pray that Allah helps the whole world establish peace and serenity,” he added.

Father Paul told reporters it is imperative that the United Nations and Islamic organizations play an effective role in countering U.S. and Israeli actions. The OIC, an association of 57 member nations, works to protect the interests of the Muslim world.

The priest explained that bombings by American forces have claimed enough innocent lives in Afghanistan and Iraq to amount to open terrorism.

“We strongly condemn the merciless attacks and growing ruthless aggression of American and NATO forces. We demand that America stop its interference in these areas,” Father Paul read.

He also denounced the situation in Gaza, where Israeli bombardment and ground attacks since Dec. 27 had killed hundreds of people. By Jan. 9, more than 760 people, at least half of them civilians, had died in the fighting.

“The blood of innocent people is being spilled for fun in Gaza,” Father Paul said, adding that the assault comes on top of Israeli restrictions that have long victimized the Palestinian people.

He later told UCA News the press conference was a purely diocesan initiative but added, “We wish that other dioceses in Pakistan would also protest for peace in the Middle East.”

Bishop Coutts also told UCA News the diocese organized the press conference to convey the church’s call for peace.

“Civil wars are going on in 34 countries. Man is fighting man and has forgotten peace. If the church remains silent, there will be no end to tyranny,” he said.

Pakistan’s Christians have been vulnerable to attack by militant Muslims since October 2001, when the United States, viewed by many Pakistanis as a Christian nation, began pursuing al-Qaida and the Taliban regime in neighboring Afghanistan, another Muslim country. The deposed fundamentalist Islamic regime of Afghanistan has many supporters across the border in Pakistan, where about 95 percent of the people are Muslims.

In March 2003, American-led forces invaded Iraq, yet another Muslim country in the region. The military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq continue, although NATO forces now also are involved in Afghanistan.