

Religious leaders declare hope for Mideast, urge strong U.S. role

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Leaders of 29 national Christian, Jewish and Muslim organizations issued a joint call for the Bush administration and the new Congress to make Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace a top foreign policy priority.

Peace is “an essential of faith” in all three religious traditions, they said.

They asked U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to meet with them to discuss the “urgent situation” in the Middle East and the need for “active, fair and firm leadership by the United States” to promote a comprehensive peace in the region.

In a consensus statement and a letter to Rice, both dated Dec. 12 and released Dec. 14, the leaders expressed the belief that the current crisis can be turned into an opportunity for change and that the current Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire offers hope for restarting negotiations.

“The crisis in Gaza and the war in Lebanon and northern Israel remind us that the status quo in the region is unstable and untenable,” they said in the seven-page statement. “Military action will not resolve the conflict.”

“The only authentic way forward is a negotiated settlement built on difficult, but realistic, compromises and security arrangements with international guarantees,” they added. “The path to peace requires a rejection of violence and an embrace of dialogue.”

Catholic signatories on the letter and statement were Cardinal William H. Keeler of Baltimore; Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, recently retired archbishop of Washington; and Bishop William S. Skylstad of Spokane, Wash., president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The Rev. Michael E. Livingston, president of the National Council of Churches, and leaders of 12 Orthodox or Protestant denominations or national organizations signed the letter and statement.

Among the 12 Jewish signatories were Rabbi Harry K. Danziger, president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism.

The seven Muslim signatories included Sayyid Muhammad Syeed, national director of the Islamic Society of North America's Office of Interfaith and Community Alliances, and Naim Baig, secretary-general of the Islamic Circle of North America.