

Retired general tells religious leaders child soldiers are new weapon

WINNIPEG, Manitoba - Child soldiers have become the "new low-technology weapon" of today's wars, said the retired Canadian general who led U.N. peacekeeping forces during the Rwandan genocide.

Retired Gen. Romeo Dallaire, now a Canadian senator from Quebec, told more than 70 delegates and 130 observers at the opening session of the June 21-23 World Religions Summit that child soldiers "can be very effective. There are more than 300,000 of them at any one time involved in 30 conflicts."

"This is not just a crime against humanity," said Dallaire. "It is a sin."

He also told the gathering at the University of Winnipeg that the old world order of the Cold War has been replaced by a "new world disorder." He lamented the short-term thinking that he said drives today's political decision-makers.

"They are swimming in the complexity and ambiguity of our times. They are thinking of tomorrow's headlines, not of what will still be significant five years from now," he said.

They need "the depth that faith provides," he said, adding that the world is begging for visionary, not reactive, leadership.

Catholics worked alongside spiritual leaders from all the major faith traditions as they gathered in Winnipeg to craft a statement to influence political leaders at the highest levels.

"The suffering of the poor is the starting point," said Alberto Quattrucci of the Community of Sant'Egidio in Rome. "There is no struggle against poverty; there is solidarity with the poor."

“The Bible doesn’t speak of poverty, but of the poor. They always have a name,” he said. “To build a society starting with the poor is to build a society sustainable for everyone.”

But reducing everything to the lowest common denominator of the market, he said, represents “rebellion against God.”

The gathering aimed to send a clear message from the global religious community to the leaders of the Group of Eight and Group of 20 nations meeting the same week in Huntsville, Ontario, and Toronto. The religious leaders are advocating justice for the poor, care for the planet and sustainable peace.

“Our job as people of faith is to announce what is politically unrealistic, and then make it realistic. The prophetic vocation is to proclaim the impossible, and then make it possible,” said the Rev. Jim Wallis, author of “God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It” and founder of the Sojourners Community, a Christian social justice organization in the United States.

“Politicians have leveraged the greatest scientists and economists,” said David Courchene of the Anishinabe Nation. “When are they going to leverage the people of the heart?”