

STATEMENT ON SYRIA
ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE
UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

September 10, 2013

The Administrative Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is gathered for its September 2013 meeting in Washington, DC, just three miles away from the Capitol where Congress is debating a resolution to authorize the use of military force in Syria. Today we prayed for our nations' leaders and for the Church and people of Syria. Having just participated, with our people, in the Holy Father's Day of Prayer and Fasting for Peace in Syria, the Middle East and the world on September 7, we commit ourselves to continued prayer and action for peace in the days ahead.

As our nation contemplates military intervention, we stand in solidarity with the Church and people of Syria, and with our Holy Father, Pope Francis, and the bishops of the Middle East. We affirm the actions and messages of our President, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, and the Chairman of our Committee on International Justice and Peace, Bishop Richard E. Pates, and now add our own collective voice to theirs in the national debate.

Chemical weapons have no place in the arsenals of the family of nations. There is no doubt that the use of chemical weapons in Syria was a heinous crime against humanity. As Pope Francis declared: "With utmost firmness I condemn the use of chemical weapons: I tell you that those terrible images from recent days are burned into my mind and heart. There is a judgment of God and of history upon our actions which are inescapable!"

Tragically, the deaths from chemical weapons are only part of the grievous story of Syria these days. More than 100,000 Syrians have lost their lives. More than 2 million have fled the country as refugees. More than 4 million within Syria have been driven from their homes by violence. A humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding in Syria. We call upon our nation and the international community to save lives by pressing for serious dialogue to end the conflict, by refraining from fueling further violence with military attacks or arms transfers, and by offering more humanitarian assistance.

We have heard the urgent calls of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, and our suffering brother bishops of the venerable and ancient Christian Churches of the Middle East. As one, they beg the international community *not* to resort to military intervention in Syria. They have made it clear that a military attack will be counterproductive, will exacerbate an already deadly situation, and will have unintended negative consequences. Their concerns strongly resonate in American public opinion that questions the wisdom of intervention and in the lack of international support.

We recall a decade ago when the Holy See and the Church in the Middle East urgently warned of the "unpredictable" and "grave" consequences of a U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, concerns we shared with our government. Although Syria is not Iraq and the resolution before Congress calls for a limited strike, not an invasion, the warnings we are hearing from the Holy See and local bishops of the region are similar; they question the probability of success of the use of military force in

shortening the conflict and saving lives. We are also aware of the heavy burden already borne by the military and their families.

For this reason, we make our own the appeal of Pope Francis: “I exhort the international community to make every effort to promote clear proposals for peace in that country without further delay, a peace based on dialogue and negotiation, for the good of the entire Syrian people. May no effort be spared in guaranteeing humanitarian assistance to those wounded by this terrible conflict, in particular those forced to flee and the many refugees in nearby countries.”

The Congressional resolution acknowledges that “the conflict in Syria will only be resolved through a negotiated political settlement.” Instead of employing armed force, our nation should work with the international community and direct all of its considerable diplomatic capabilities to initiate dialogue and negotiation. The use of force is always a last resort, and it should only be employed by legitimate authority in accordance with international norms. The lack of international and domestic consensus in this case is deeply troubling. Recent international proposals to secure and destroy Syria’s chemical weapons deserve serious consideration, evaluation and encouragement.

We affirm the longstanding position of our Conference of Bishops that the Syrian people urgently need a political solution. We ask the United States to work with other governments to obtain a ceasefire, initiate serious negotiations, provide impartial humanitarian assistance, and encourage efforts to build an inclusive society in Syria that protects the rights of all its citizens, including Christians and other minorities.

As Congress struggles with the complex challenges and humanitarian catastrophe that have engulfed Syria, we offer the voice of the Universal Church and our prayers for peace.