

Behind the news: Visions for peace – Voices of faith

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Providing church, ecumenical and interfaith information, resources, and analysis on issues of current global concern

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1. Changes in “Behind the News: Visions for Peace – Voices of Faith”: Moving to a monthly, streamlined format

“Behind the News: Visions of Peace, Voices of Faith” was launched on 4 October 2001 as a joint initiative by the World Council of Churches (WCC), Action by Churches Together (ACT), and the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA) to provide alternative information on the unfolding crisis resulting from the 11 September attacks and subsequent military actions. After three months, staff evaluated the service, drawing on the many responses to our request for feedback.

We have been impressed by the extremely positive reaction to "Behind the News". Many have expressed appreciation for both the content of the materials and for the regular flow of information. Many readers have forwarded the bulletin to their own e-mail lists or posted it on their websites. A number of individuals and church and organizational leaders have also noted that the sharing of information has significantly aided them in their own responses.

It is clear that the crisis triggered by the 11 September attacks and the military retaliation is not over. Military actions continue in Afghanistan, humanitarian needs are intensifying, and medium- and long-term consequences continue to be manifest throughout the world. Moreover, there is uncertainty about further US actions.

In recent weeks, as the nature of the crisis has changed, information from church sources (statements, theological reflections, worship resources, etc.) has dwindled. A strong demand to share information not available from other sources continues however. The staff group working on the bulletin has decided to continue the service on a **monthly basis**, focusing on including materials that are not generally available elsewhere and that our three organizations are well positioned to provide. Another evaluation of the service will be held in three to four months.

The bulletin (and information posted on the website) will focus on faith-based reflections and resources on the continuing consequences of the 11 September attacks, including connections with the rapidly deteriorating situation in the Middle East. In addition, an analytical piece or editorial that provides more in-depth reflection on a particular issue or approach will be included each month.

You are strongly encouraged to share materials from your regions and faith communities with the editors.

2. Statements and actions of the global church and ecumenical family

a) In his speech at the opening of the sixth World Russian Council, His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia noted that in spite of the joint efforts of various nations and states, nobody can claim that the evil of terrorism has been defeated for good. Many problems in the world remain which could be used for false self-justification and attracting supporters, including the injustices in the present world order, the inequitable distribution of power and wealth, the attempts of some forces, both in East and West, to impose their will on the nations. He refers to Russia's position as a bridge linking East and West, North and South and the millennium-long experience of dialogue and cooperation between Orthodox Christians and Islam. He calls for Russia and the entire Orthodox civilization to become one of the decision-making centres in the world. "Let it be our own contribution to building a lasting peace with justice on all the continents." <http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru/ne112131.htm>

b) The sixth World Russian People's Council in December 2001 was organized around the theme of "Russia: Faith and Civilization. Dialogue of Epochs". In its concluding statement, the Council noted that "the world is restless again... we have become witnesses to terrible crimes and human tragedies. We have seen again how fragile the human common house is. We declare resolutely that terrorism and any aggressive violence should be rebuffed in the toughest possible way... at the same time, all countries should increase their work to overcome both economic and political injustice in the world... the world today cannot be built only on the basis of one civilization model, one worldview, one religion." <http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru/ne112142.htm>.

c) In a joint NCCC/CWS statement on the US domestic response to terrorism, Rev. Robert Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA and Rev. John McCullough, executive director of Church World Service, acknowledge the deep sense of loss, pain, anger, fear and vulnerability of these past months. The statement also expresses concern at the consequences of the US government's domestic response to terrorism. In particular, they are alarmed at the Justice Department's powers to detain non-citizens without identifying who has been arrested or providing any details; the proposed military tribunals for alleged terrorists; and the proposal that visa applications and immigration status will be expedited for individuals who provide information to authorities about terrorist activities. The statement concludes that "the right of open debate is a part of our nation's legal and cultural heritage, a strength not a weakness". <http://www.nccusa.org>.

d) "Unpacking religious dimensions after September 11 – Christian perspectives" was the subject of a seminar organized by the Ecumenical Working Group at the Church Center for the United Nations. The seminar included panels on: unpacking religious rhetoric: Christian understandings of 'justice,' 'evil' and 'war;' unpacking the roots of violence and terrorism: religious extremism and global injustice; and unpacking challenges for Christians in a multi-faith world: pathways to peace. For further information or the full statements at the conference, contact Damaris Frehrking, at damarisf@earthlink.net.

e) In November, the U.S. Catholic bishops issued a Pastoral Letter entitled “Living with Faith and Hope after September 11th” in which they reviewed the U.S. government’s response to the events of September 11th, particularly in declaring war on the presumed perpetrators of the tragedies in New York, Arlington, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. The bishops called for dialogue among Christians and with other faith communities as a means to achieve peace. In that spirit of dialogue, nearly 70 individuals from Catholic institutions and religious congregations in the US, as well as organizations with ministries to the Catholic community, commented publicly on the current crisis applying the principles the Pastoral Letter raised. In their statement, they declared that the present “war on terrorism” is morally unjustifiable and calls for a new Catholic paradigm to replace the Just War Theory. “Bishops and all Catholics,” they say, “must rethink the framework for making judgments on war and peace in order to highlight the serious restrictions which Catholic moral teaching has placed on warlike actions – in practice ruling out modern warfare. These same restrictions judge this war to be immoral even though it appears to have just cause.” <http://www.wcc-coe/wcc/behindthenews/us136.html>

3. Responses from other faith communities

a) The Middle East Council of Churches and World Council of Churches jointly organized a series of three meetings at the local, regional and international levels on Christian-Muslim dialogue. The meetings were held in Cairo, Egypt from 17-21 December. The regional meeting adopted a joint charter for a dialogue of life and common action which acknowledges awareness of the dangers of the “clash of civilizations” thesis, and calls for living dialogue on two levels: the Muslim-Christian dialogue within the Arab world and the dialogue between Arab Christians and Muslims with peoples of other cultures. The final seminar, which brought together 45 scholars and leaders from the Arab world, the USA, Europe and Asia, called for more reflection on religion and violence “knowing very well that violence is not grounded in religious texts but in the history of people who interpret those texts”.
<http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/news/press/01/45pu.html>
<http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/news/press/01/46pu.html>

b) An international conference on "Peaceful coexistence between the great monotheistic religions" was held in Brussels, 19-20 December 2001, at the invitation of His All Holiness Bartholomew, the ecumenical patriarch, and His Excellency Romano Prodi, president of the European Commission. In a declaration, “The peace of God in the world: towards peaceful coexistence and collaboration among the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam”, participants affirmed "the will of God is for the peace of heaven to reign on earth" and that such peace is not merely the absence of war but also the gift of abundant life. Thus "there is indeed an immediate and inseparable connection between peace and justice." The statement emphasizes the need for education, communication, dialogue, and respect to enhance understanding of religious communities and their beliefs
<http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/behindthenews/us135.html>

4. Humanitarian concerns

a) Refugees and asylum seekers: Australia’s immigration minister announced on 23 December that the ouster of the Taliban and the installation of a transitional

government in Afghanistan meant that the nearly 2,000 Afghans in Australian detention centers may no longer have grounds for asylum. He added that if Australia concluded that it was safe to do so, the next step would be to send the asylum-seekers back to Afghanistan with the help of the United Nations.

http://www.refugees.org/news/press_releases/2001/123101.cfm

As one enters Afghan refugee camps, the traumas they must have gone through is noticeable on the refugees' faces. Each has a story about devastation written on it. Learn more about the lives of Afghan refugees from *Desolation within*, (<http://www.churchworldservice.org/Reports2002/afghanistan/refugeestories/index.html>) a collection of stories written by CWS staff in Pakistan.

An article in *The Guardian Unlimited* on January 3 details conditions in the Maslakh camp, which, according to aid workers quoted by the author, is on the brink of an Ethiopian-style humanitarian disaster. Situated 30 miles west of Herat city, the camp is home to more than 350,000 displaced Afghans, of whom 100 die each day of exposure and starvation. "100 Afghans perish daily as strained aid network collapses under flood of new arrivals."

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4328292,00.html>

Afghan refugees in Pakistan are eager to return home, but the UN wants them to stay a bit longer:

<http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/UNID/6C8D4A485E171928C1256B42004095BC>

b) Aid efforts:

Members of Action by Churches Together (ACT) continue to help people in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries. The earthquake that hit Afghanistan on January 3 was a minor one and caused very little damage in Kabul. The earthquake had no impact on humanitarian relief programmes, according to ACT members, who are part of the extensive effort to support the people and help rebuild the country. At present, aid workers are struggling to meet the basic needs of people who, under difficult circumstances, also have to endure the harsh conditions of winter. ACT members - which include Church World Service (CWS), Christian Aid (CAID), Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), Hungarian Interchurch Aid (HIA), Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) - report that people in remote mountainous areas have no food left and depend solely on humanitarian aid. ACT members continue to distribute food and shelter material to the most needy people inside Afghanistan and to refugees in neighbouring countries. See *ACT Dateline* "Across the barbed wire" of 11 January 2002.

http://act-intl.org/news/dt_nr_2002/dtafghan0102.html

For stories on humanitarian relief and aid in Afghanistan by members of ACT International, please visit: <http://act-intl.org/>

Christian Aid reports in its latest update on Afghanistan, dated January 9, 2002, that the situation in Afghanistan remained relatively stable over the Christmas and New Year period. Food deliveries by the World Food Programme have increased, and some 4,000 tonnes of food is reportedly being delivered to Afghanistan daily. However the key to averting serious hunger is ensuring that the food can be distributed to those in

need, and Christian Aid's partners remain firmly engaged in this struggle. For more information, click on <http://www.christian-aid.org.uk/afghanistan/020109.htm>

The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) reports that it will deploy helicopters in an effort to access remote areas where thousands of people are nearing starvation. For more information, click on:

<http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/UNID/A5AEF8BD0FFA60D049256B4200212001>

The reconstruction of Afghanistan is expected to cost about \$15 billion over the next decade, the UN says. For more information about this issue, please visit:

<http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/UNID/B2A068DA2754B64C85256B42005550B7>

Alarming levels of malnutrition have been uncovered by aid workers in northern Afghanistan: http://www.concern.ie/news/afghan_press7.htm

One of the most powerful signals of hope for Afghanistan's future will be the sight of boys and girls attending classes, says Unicef's Nigel Fisher. He wrote an article for a newspaper:

http://www.globeandmail.com/servlet/GIS.Servlets.HTMLTemplate?tf=tgam/search/tgam/SearchFullStory.html&cf=tgam/search/tgam/SearchFullStory.cfg&configFileLoc=tgam/config&encoded_keywords=Afghanistan&option=&start_row=8¤t_row=8&start_row_offset1=&num_rows=1&search_results_start=1

The rebuilding task facing Afghanistan's interim administration is an overwhelming one. According to the UN the country was virtually bankrupt. BBC reports from Kabul:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/south_asia/newsid_1761000/1761983.stm

The UN World Food Programme says that it has sent a record 80,000 tons of food into Afghanistan so far this month:

<http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/central/12/26/ret.afghan.refugees/index.html>

A *New York Times* article quotes several relief officials who have expressed concern that the United States is exaggerating the success of relief efforts, and could possibly imperil future aid operations by drawing too rosy a picture. "Warlords Steal Food Shipments, Hampering Efforts to Relieve Famine"

<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/04/international/asia/04AID.html>

[free registration required]

c) Effects of bombing campaign:

The continued US bombing campaign is posing serious risks for the new Afghan administration of Hamid Karzai, according to analyst Shiraz Paracha. So far, opposition to the bombing is reported to have been strongest among clans in northern Pakistan, but those in southern Afghanistan are also becoming increasingly unhappy over the campaign. In a bid to diffuse Pashtun dissent, the prime minister has urged his people to unite behind him, arguing that this is vital if they want to play a significant role in the future of the country. Initially, most Pashtun representatives agreed that America be allowed to pursue Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders in the border region, but

with the mounting casualty toll, traditional Afghan suspicion of foreign interference has begun to surface. <http://www.fpif.org/outside/commentary/2002/0201karzai.html>

The Washington Post reports that human rights groups and the United Nations continue to question the number of civilian casualties from US bombing raids in Afghanistan. Many with long experience in such assessments are skeptical of any firm accounting of civilian casualties - and also skeptical of the Pentagon's virtually routine denials of casualties. "More Civilian Bombing Casualties Alleged": <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A59457-2002Jan3.html>

One report on civilian casualties from the bombing comes from Professor Marc W. Herold of the Departments of Economics and Women's Studies at the University of New Hampshire in "A dossier on civilian victims of United States' aerial bombing of Afghanistan: a comprehensive accounting" produced in December. <http://www.democracynow.org/thndtrmb.doc>

5. Editorial analysis: Assessing conflicting aid information

We are receiving conflicting information these days from Afghanistan. There are, for example, the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) officials who recently declared that they have turned the tide and averted famine in Afghanistan. On the other hand, we hear about the ordeal of villagers in remote areas of northern Afghanistan who have been eating grass to survive, and how some have died from hunger. NGOs are warning that the humanitarian crisis remains acute, and that food has not reached some of the more isolated regions.

The WFP officials are certainly right in pointing out that widespread famine can be avoided because, after the fall of the Taliban, an enormous amount of food can be shipped into the country and distributed there by the WFP and relief groups. And despite fears of a harsh winter as of mid-November, the season has in fact been relatively mild in some areas, which has facilitated the distribution of food and shelter.

But it is very dangerous to proclaim success in terms of food supply at this stage. We must keep in mind what happened when the conflict began last year. For aid workers, one of the most worrying messages was that the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan was closed. This information led journalists and the public to conclude that it was impossible to ship relief goods into Afghanistan.

The response from people in donor countries was that they did not want to give money to purchase food or other relief items to be stored somewhere in Pakistan. It was very difficult to convince the public that the reality is much more complex, and that there are many ways for aid organisations to get relief into Afghanistan.

The western public is not used to the huge gap between official statements and what is really happening on the ground. I witnessed this for myself in Pakistan last October when I visited the border with Afghanistan near Peshawar. On the road to the Khyber Pass, we saw many trucks coming from Afghanistan loaded with onions to sell in the markets in Pakistan. And from Pakistan, there were trucks packed with goods, especially wheat flour, on their way to sell in the markets in Afghanistan.

We should thus beware of making sweeping statements that can be misleading. With our members on the ground in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, we in Action by Churches Together (ACT) International have the opportunity to provide an accurate understanding of a complex situation. All of ACT's work is carried out through local Afghan partners who have access to remote areas. With a new interim government and an administration just being set up, it will of course be difficult to evaluate the overall humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. Even under the Taliban government, the situation varied from area to area, and the most important factor for delivery of supplies was getting the cooperation of local authorities.

The complexity of the situation is difficult to convey to the public precisely because it varies so much from place to place. The latest news of concern is that 400,000 people in the south around Kandahar are cut off from support because of the lack of security in that area, and that 13,000 Afghans are stranded in a no-man's land between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

We also receive encouraging news. ACT member Christian Aid reported in December, for example, that a convoy of trucks carrying much-needed supplies had left Herat for the district of Chegcheran, one of the most vulnerable areas of Ghor province, and was able to cross the high mountain pass into the district. That was important because, since 11 September, only a very small quantity of emergency supplies had reached the 150,000 people in Chegcheran. And some of the remote mountain areas - where tens of thousands of people, many of them too weak to leave their villages, are in danger of starving - can be only reached by donkey. So the most important thing at the moment is to do everything possible to get food to these people.

Rainer Lang
Action by Churches Together (ACT)

6. Resources for further reflection

a) Paul Rogat Loeb, an associated scholar at Seattle's Center for Ethical Leadership in the USA, suggests that individual compassion, while important, is not enough to create a just world. Instead, he suggests that recent events triggered by "cycles of vengeance" (www.soulofacitizen.org/articles/worldtrade.htm) must inspire ordinary citizens to collectively ask difficult questions and make necessary choices that respect the dignity and humanity of all human beings.

b) "What kinds of relationships are we trying to build and what are the social worldviews that produce this phenomenon?" And that kind of thinking requires us to think well beyond the immediacy of military response...? " *Sojourners* editor Jim Wallis interviews three non-violence theologians concerning recent events.

Walter Wink:

http://www.sojo.net/news/index.cfm/action/display_archives/mode/current_opinion/article/CO_010702w.html

Stanley Hauerwas:

http://www.sojo.net/news/index.cfm/action/display_archives/mode/current_opinion/article/CO_010702h.html

John Paul Lederach:

http://www.sojo.net/news/index.cfm/action/display_archives/mode/current_opinion/article/CO_0107021.html

c) A compilation of essays by various scholars - Dalai Lama, S. N. Goeka, Ayesha Singh, Cajetan Menezes and Sarah van Gelder - on the possible role that religions could play in building peace and prayers for peace in various religious traditions and in the latest issue of *The Axe*, a journal published from India. For copies, write to the editor the_axe@rediffmail.com.

d) Gene Stoltzfus, US director/program coordinator of Christian Peacemaker Teams, and Doug Pritchard, CPT Canada coordinator, travelled to Peshawar, Pakistan and Kabul, Afghanistan, over the past 30 days to better understand the prospects and techniques for peace-building in the region. Their reports, distributed by email, look at effects of the bombing campaign on aid and peace-building efforts, and cultural approaches to conflict resolution. Their articles continue to be posted on the CPT web site at <http://www.prairienet.org/cpt/afghanistan.php>

e) The Council of Societies for the Study of Religion has published an article by Glen Stassen, "New Paradigm: Just Peacemaking Theory" that is available by subscription (<http://www.cssr.org/publications.htm#bulletin>) or in the original book *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* published by Pilgrim Press. <http://www.pilgrimpress.com/books/book-1266-0.html>

f) The January issue of the Italian mission magazine, *Popoli*, run by the Jesuits in Milan, is a special dossier on Islam which gives particular attention to the ideological and cultural war rather than to military operations. Available in Italian at: <http://www.gesuiti.it/popoli/index.html>

g) [peacemaker.st](http://www.peacemaker.st/) is a comprehensive website of resources, information, a forum and meeting place for peace, peace-makers, diversity, non-violent conflict resolution at <http://www.peacemaker.st/>

h) Women Waging Peace is a global initiative of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government that breaks new ground by identifying the essential role and contribution of women in preventing violent conflict, stopping war, and sustaining peace in fragile areas around the world. <http://www.womenwagingpeace.net/>

New articles found on their website include:

"Muslim Women As Symbols and Pawns" and "The War's 'Dispensable' People" by Rina Amiri, senior associate for research and outreach and "Parallel Tragedies of Colombia, the US" by Maria Cristina Caballero, core network member.

i) **9-11peace.org** is an interactive website of dialogue, resources and action calling for "action for justice, not war". It promotes a non-military response as the best strategy for a permanent end to terror. <http://www.9-11peace.org/index.php3>

Specific steps for action for peace can be found on the site at:

<http://www.peace-action.org/911statement.htm>

j) In **Bush's International Charade**, Richard Falk, challenges the perception that the American president has seen the multilateral light. Falk is professor emeritus of

international law at Princeton University, is the author of "Religion and humane global governance". This article appeared in AlterNet on 20 December.

<http://www.alternet.org/story.html?StoryID=12134>

Behind the news: Visions for Peace – Voices of Faith is a joint initiative of:

World Council of Churches (WCC) - a fellowship of 342 churches, in more than 100 countries in all continents from virtually all Christian traditions. The Roman Catholic Church is not a member church but works cooperatively with the WCC. The highest governing body is the Assembly, which meets approximately every seven years. The WCC was formally inaugurated in 1948 in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance - a global action network of 62 churches and church-related organizations who have pledged themselves to change unjust policies and practices related to global trade and HIV/AIDS, and to take up as a special concern work on peace and conflict resolution by forging strategic partnership. Alliance participants come from every corner of the globe and varied traditions within the ecumenical family – Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Anglican, as well as church-related organizations who themselves represent and serve many Christian faith traditions. Alliance participants are committed to speak out with one voice against injustice and structures which deprive human beings of dignity, and for alternative visions based on the Gospel.

Action by Churches Together (ACT) - an international alliance of churches and relief agencies assisting thousands of people recovering from emergencies in more than 50 countries worldwide.

This bulletin/website is intended to provide an ecumenical space for visions for peace and voices of faith; these materials do not necessarily reflect official policy of WCC, ACT, or EAA.

Please circulate the Bulletin to friends, colleagues and people who are looking for alternative perspectives on the current situation.

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Web: <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/behindthenews>