

WCC: World must stop Holy Land cycle of violence: Pleas from church leaders follow UN call to defuse tensions

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The international community needs “to take bold and novel actions to uphold international law and break the vicious cycle of violence” in the escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict, according to World Council of Churches general secretary Samuel Kobia.

“The unwarranted upsurge in violence if allowed to continue will only add to the untold sufferings of the Palestine people, the primary victims of this ongoing conflict,” said Kobia in a letter sent on June 30 to representatives of the group known as the Quartet, consisting of the U.S., the European Union, the UN and Russia.

Kobia said retaliatory measures taken by Israel, including the detention of Hamas leaders after the seizing of an Israeli soldier on June 25, “are not going to resolve the problem” but will likely result in “further embitterment and hate.”

In the United States, Mark S. Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, joined Frank Griswold, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, in a letter appealing to President Bush to do everything possible to calm the crisis in Gaza.

“We condemn the kidnapping of the Israeli soldier and pray for his safe return,” said Hanson and Griswold in their letter. “We recognize the grief this brings to all Israelis, but we cannot accept the response which punishes all Palestinians in Gaza.”

The pleas from church leaders came after Secretary General Kofi Annan of the UN called on Israel and the Palestinians to defuse the escalation of tension in the

Palestinian territories.

For his part, Kobia said he recognizes Israel's right "to ensure security for its citizens," but he called on the Israeli government to "refrain from using excessive military force and immediately open equitable negotiations to find a permanent solution through ending the illegal occupation and securing a just peace."

At the same time the Palestinian leadership "should also continue to seek a platform for equitable negotiations and hold to the one-party ceasefire and a diplomatic solution," Kobia noted. *-Ecumenical News International*