

World church leaders urge Mideast ceasefire: Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican and Catholic faithful call for peace

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Christian leaders representing millions of Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican and Catholic faithful, along with councils of churches, are calling for an end to the large-scale violence in Lebanon and Israel.

“The escalating violence and regional dimension of the conflict is alarming,” said the coalition Churches for Middle East Peace in a July 20 letter to President Bush. “It is urgent that you call on all the parties to restrain from using force and, rather, to trust a diplomatic process.”

Earlier, on July 7, the patriarchs and heads of local churches in Jerusalem had declared that the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians had “gone too far” and was “without proportion or justification.” A July 18 statement from the Middle East Council of Churches, issued from Beirut, Lebanon, pleaded for a cease-fire on that front.

Likewise, Pope Benedict XVI on July 20 called for “an immediate cease-fire” to allow humanitarian aid to get to the innocent victims of the violence. “In reality, the Lebanese have the right to see the integrity and sovereignty of their country respected, the Israelis the right to live in peace in their state, and the Palestinians have the right to have their own free and sovereign homeland,” the pope said.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, writing July 19 to the Christian churches in the Mideast, said, “My condemnation of this resort to violence is unequivocal. I offer you every support in your efforts to bring it to an end and allow Lebanon to be, once again, a living message of coexistence and solidarity between different religious communities.”

The New York-based National Council of Churches and its partner relief agency, Church World Service, earlier voiced its support for the G8 leaders' statement from Moscow, which said in part: "These extremist elements and those that support them cannot be allowed to plunge the Middle East into chaos and provoke a wider conflict."

Antonios Kireopoulos, NCC's associate general secretary for international affairs and peace, interpreted the G8 statement to include Israeli leaders as well as Hezbollah and Hamas leaders as risking "further destabilization of the region."

Writing to Bush, Clifton Kirkpatrick, stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), said, "The people of the Middle East, the birthplace of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, are groaning under the burden of war and desperately desire peace." Kirkpatrick added that what is needed is "a sane and diplomatic voice, which the United States can provide."