

World Council of Churches urges stop to settlements, but Israel moving ahead: Israeli policy "very hard to understand"

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The World Council of Churches has called on the Israeli government to “implement an open-ended freeze” on all settlement construction and expansion in the West Bank and East Jerusalem “in preparation for negotiating peace in good faith” in the region.

“Even as Israel’s own right to exist evokes sympathy and solidarity around the world, its policies of expansion and annexation generate dismay or hostility,” asserted the WCC’s Central Committee, its main governing body, at a closing session September 2 in Geneva.

The statement also called on world governments to “distinguish between the legitimate interests of the state of Israel and its illegal settlements.”

However, Israel signaled its intent on September 4 to construct hundreds of new homes for Jewish settlers in the West Bank. The decision by Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu was leaked to Israeli news media and confirmed by an Israeli official.

The decision by Netanyahu complicated a U.S. effort by President Obama to launch a new peace initiative at the United Nations. Even if Israel considers a limited and temporary suspension of building, the Israeli official said it would not apply to the added new homes or to the 2,500 housing units being built on West Bank land claimed by the Palestinians, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

The WCC’s general secretary-elect, Norwegian Lutheran theologian Olav Fykse Tveit, on September 1 told a German Protestant news agency that the settlement

policy of Israel is “very hard to understand,” considering that it is one of the main barriers to Middle East peace.

Tveit added that the WCC’s struggle for Palestinian rights does not have anti-Jewish motivation. The WCC “has always stressed that Israel needs to exist within internationally recognized borders,” he said.

Earlier in the meeting, however, the WCC outgoing general secretary, Methodist minister Samuel Kobia, had drawn fire from the American Jewish Committee August 28 for his declaration that Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories is “a sin against God.”

“Reverend Kobia parrots the same hypocritical statements regarding Israel that the WCC regularly issues, ignoring the root causes of Israel’s presence in the West Bank,” said David Rosen, a rabbi and AJC’s international director of interreligious affairs.

In his final address to the Central Committee, Kobia said, “Occupation, along with the concomitant humiliation of a whole people for over six decades, constitutes not just economic and political crimes but, like anti-Semitism, it is a sin against God.”

Among other actions at the Central Committee meeting, WCC officials called on the government of Pakistan to repeal the section of the country’s penal code that carries a mandatory death penalty for anyone found guilty of blasphemy. Urging Pakistan to “guarantee the rights of all religious minorities in the country,” the statement said non-Muslims are living “in a state of fear and terror”—especially Christians since the country’s penal code was amended in 1986.

It was noted that human rights organizations have said that charges against non-Muslims can be based on malicious accusations, “often with the motivation to have people imprisoned to gain advantage in business or land disputes.”

Although blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad is punishable by death under the law of Pakistan, nobody has been executed for it. Courts have acquitted those accused of blasphemy in more than 100 cases, overruling lower tribunals. But some lawyers have said that non-Muslims they have defended, including Christians, have been killed while awaiting trial.

Members of the Central Committee voted 70-59 to hold the tenth assembly of the WCC's highest governing body, its General Assembly, in Busan, South Korea, rather than in Damascus in 2013. Busan is the second-largest city in South Korea, after Seoul, and Christians, more than two-thirds of them Protestant, make up about 27 percent of South Korea's 48.5 million population.

The WCC represents more than 560 million Christians and has 349 member bodies, principally Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant churches. The WCC General Assembly has never met in the Middle East or in East Asia. *-Ecumenical News International*