

Christians back from Iran urge diplomacy: Peace advocates visit Ahmadinejad

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A delegation of 13 officials of American church-related and peace groups who recently traveled to Iran and met with that nation's president for more than two hours have urged members of Congress to help defuse tensions over Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

"Our governments have not spoken for 30 years," said Jeff Carr, CEO of Sojourners/Call to Renewal. "We think that beginning dialogue and paving the way for mutual respect and peaceful relations is really something that needs to happen, and religious leaders could play a significant role in that."

During the February 17-25 trip, the group met with Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami, members of parliament and local religious leaders.

The trip was organized by the Mennonite Central Committee and the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker group. Others included representatives from the Episcopal and United Methodist churches and the National Council of Churches.

"I have no reservation about conducting talks with American officials if we see some good will," the Christians quoted Ahmadinejad as saying in a statement they issued February 26 in Washington.

Still, Iran's foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, has reiterated that his country would never suspend uranium enrichment, the Associated Press reported. The U.S. contends that that program must be halted if talks are to take place, saying it fears it is part of a secret plan by Tehran to build nuclear weapons. The Bush administration has also maintained that Iran is supporting anti-U.S. insurgents in Iraq.

Nevertheless, American officials said on February 27, in a shift of U.S. policy toward high-level contacts with Iran, that they would take part in two meetings in March and April with representatives from Iraq, Syria and Iran. The *New York Times* noted that while the meetings to focus on stabilizing Iraq may not include direct U.S.-Iranian negotiations, "they could crack open a door to a diplomatic channel."

In the meeting with Ahmadinejad, the Christian delegation also spoke about the role of religion in easing conflict, the Iraq war, nuclear proliferation and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The visitors said the Iranian president advocated solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through political rather than military means.

Jim Winkler, general secretary of the United Methodists' social action arm, said the group plans to stress the need for dialogue with Iran when they meet with members of Congress, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and top leaders of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "There have to be talks," he said.

The group's joint statement urged the U.S. and Iran to "immediately engage in direct, face-to-face talks" and to cease casting each other in "enemy" images. —*Religion News Service, Ecumenical News International*