

Churches urge NATO to remove all nuclear weapons from Europe

News

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New York, March 17 (ENInews)--Ecumenical organizations on both sides of the Atlantic are urging NATO to remove all U.S. nuclear weapons still based in Europe and end their role in the alliance's policy.

The 200 or so nuclear weapons involved are "remnants of Cold War strategies," the ecumenical groups said in joint letters released on 17 March. "NATO should rethink deterrence and security cooperation in Europe," they said, and make good on NATO's new commitment last year to create "conditions for a world without nuclear weapons."

The letters were sent to the leaders of NATO, the United States and Russia by the heads of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Conference of European Churches, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA and the Canadian Council of Churches. Removal of the U.S. weapons still stationed in Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Italy and Turkey, the churches noted, would reduce by one-third the number of countries that have nuclear weapons on their soil, to 9 from 14.

The four organizations acted now in anticipation of an important NATO nuclear policy review this year. That review and a NATO summit in 2012 present an "opportunity for change that is long overdue and widely anticipated," their messages said.

Some NATO countries, led by Germany, maintain that the weapons in question have no role today. Others insist that they be kept for political reasons even though their military utility is widely questioned. These countries include France, which also has its own nuclear arsenal, and some of the newer members of NATO in Eastern Europe.

The ecumenical organizations had addressed NATO together on this issue twice during NATO's 60th anniversary in 2009, followed by a series of church, government and NATO meetings. At the Lisbon summit late last year, however, NATO members did not make major changes in nuclear policy. The issue of the U.S. tactical nuclear weapons still based in the five non-nuclear European member states is especially divisive, according to a statement from the churches.

The church organizations also expressed concern about Russia's large arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons and stressed the urgent need for transparency, relocation and reductions there as well. However, the organizations urge NATO to exercise its own nuclear arms control responsibilities and not link the decision with potentially lengthy negotiations between the U.S. and Russia that would involve other arms control issues.

The policies of all four ecumenical organizations call for complete nuclear disarmament. A WCC delegation visited key capitals in Europe in 2004 to advocate that NATO remove the U.S. tactical or battlefield nuclear weapons still in question now.