SPEAKING OUT FOR SYRIA: STATEMENT TO GLOBAL POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS

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The situation in Syria should be a matter of grave concern for political and religious leaders throughout the world. A practicable peace plan was crafted by Kofi Annan and endorsed by the General Assembly of the United Nations. Nevertheless, leaders in the region and in the international community have allowed their self-interest to override the interests of the Syrian people. I believe that violence breeds more violence, revenge, and hatred. Armed retaliation by the government or by the opposition does not bring them any closer to a solution. The blood of civilians killed in this unjust and unnecessary conflict cries out, demanding that action be taken. As persons of faith and as persons in positions of responsibility, we are called to speak out for those who cannot speak, to be a voice for the voiceless. The Syrian people deserve to be heard—to live in dignity.

I write this statement as the President of the LWF, and also as an Arab Christian living in Jerusalem. As a refugee myself, my heart bleeds when I see Syrians streaming into refugee camps or suffering at the border as countries prepare capacity to welcome them in. I am pleased that the Lutheran World Federation has signed a memorandum of agreement with the Jordan Hashemite Charity Organization to provide shelter, camp management, psycho-social support and education services at the Za’atari Refugee camp inside the Jordanian border with Syria. I call upon the United Nations and its member states to spare no effort to deliver appropriate aid to refugees, as well as to the thousands of people displaced but still within Syria. At the same time they must not waver in their efforts to find a peaceful and just solution to this conflict. Outside actors should not allow their interests to betray the Syrian people. It is regrettable that the Syrian conflict is being viewed almost exclusively through the lens of geopolitical concern when the human suffering is so great and so avoidable.

The extremism now threatening to divide Syrians from one another threatens to fragment the present state and engulf the entire region. Military intervention could spark a regional conflict that will not stop at the Middle East alone. Governments outside Syria should pursue a Syrian-led process of dialogue and peace-building as diligently as they have pursued military conflict and the preservation of their supposed geopolitical interests.
Governments should avoid the temptation to manipulate sectarian divisions in pursuit of their interests.

The cries of the Christian communities in Syria have lifted up their particular concerns in the present conflict. In a recent gathering of Christian leaders from throughout the Middle East, I heard about their situation, including their starving people who are generally unable to access normal channels of humanitarian aid. They are worried that prolonged violence will increase their vulnerability. They are also worried no less by possible ramifications of an uncertain political future. Their cries are filled with a longing for justice and democracy. They believe in reform based on a participatory process that brings change to government with full respect of human rights, freedom of speech and freedom of religious and communal expression for all communities. Syrian Christians should remain within Syria so they can contribute to rebuilding civil society and preserve the unity of their country.

The World Council of Churches’ Central Committee has recently issued a strong statement on the crisis in Syria. I wholeheartedly endorse this statement. I particularly underline the WCC’s strong call for an end to violence, for encouraging the UN peace initiative, for affirming the Christian presence in the Middle East, for encouraging an urgent humanitarian response, and for praying for peace with justice.

Two thousand years ago when persecution broke out in the early church, the followers of Jesus found a refuge in Syria in places such as Antioch, where they were first called Christians. For centuries this has been their home. Syria has also provided a context for significant Christian-Muslim dialogue. The current conflict threatens all of this. Please pray for the wisdom of all political leaders and for the people of Syria, that they may find their lives restored with justice and peace.

*He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*

(Isaiah 2:4)