

Iraqi statement raises faint hopes for peace

By Jerry Filteau

Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — As the war in the Persian Gulf entered its second month, Pope John Paul II and other religious leaders continued to call for an end to the fighting and for negotiations for peace.

Coalition forces were gearing up for a land assault most observers expected to begin in late February, when Iraq took preliminary, limited steps that sparked new hopes for an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait and the start of a diplomatic solution.

Iraq's Feb. 15 statement of readiness to consider a withdrawal was so filled with demands and linkages that President Bush and other coalition leaders flatly rejected it. But a follow-up trip to Moscow by Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz was seen by many as opening doors for diplomatic communications that could be important for substantive negotiations at a later date.

The pope, who has repeatedly urged an end to the war, stressed Feb. 17 that he was not calling for "peace at any cost."

"We are not pacifists. We do not want peace at any cost. We want a just peace," he said during a visit to a Rome parish.

"Peace is always the work of justice," he added.

A week earlier in his Sunday Angelus



AP/Wide World Photos
Hundreds gathered Feb. 15 for noon prayer in Amman, Jordan. Later, several hundred went to the U.S. Embassy to protest the bombing of a Baghdad bomb shelter.

talk he had called for "an immediate end" to the destruction and loss of life in the gulf and for "dialogue ... to find a solution to the many anguishing problems of the Middle East."

Religious leaders remained divided about whether the gulf war was justified, but with hostilities under way many focused on issues of moral conduct in war.

In a pastoral letter to all Catholics in the U.S. armed forces Feb. 17, Archbishop Joseph T. Ryan praised the soldiers in the Gulf as "peacemakers" working for justice, but warned them against "a hardening of heart or hatred of another nation or lessening of Christian moral standards, no matter what our opponents may do."

Archbishop Ryan is head of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, which is responsible for the pastoral care of all Americans in the military.

He defended the U.S. entry into the conflict, saying that "the peace was gone before our young men and women got there. A ravaged nation and a horrified world body of nations called for a restoration of the order that was being destroyed and for a halt to the aggression that gave every indication of increasing."

Archbishop John R. Quinn of San Fran-

cisco also stressed the need for coalition forces to uphold principles of morality in warfare. In a speech to Catholic lawyers in San Francisco Feb. 12, he warned against expanding the objectives of the war beyond the original declared purpose, "the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait."

Accepting moral limitations on the conduct of war "may, at times, seem unduly onerous," he said, but it is essential if coalition goals of justice and peace are to remain intact.

While many religious leaders reserved judgment on the complex issue of whether the gulf war was justified, several new voices were added to those condemning it.

In a statement Feb. 12 from Canberra, Australia, site of the World Council of Churches General Assembly, more than 100 U.S. Protestant and Orthodox church leaders declared their opposition to the war on moral grounds, but called for their churches to respond to the many pastoral needs of those affected by it.

The statement included signatures of a number of U.S. church leaders who were not at the assembly. Among these were 15 Catholic bishops and representatives of a number of Catholic religious orders.

Father Kenneth F. Thesing, superior general of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, a U.S. missionary society, called Feb. 13 for "an immediate cease-fire." He said the war had never been justified.

The threats the war poses to Christian-Jewish-Muslim relations brought U.S. leaders of all three faiths to search for ways to improve interreligious understanding.

A rabbi and the four Christian bishops residing in Springfield, Ill., announced a joint prayer service Feb. 16. They called it "a common plea to our Father to grant us peace" and invited "prayerful participation from the Muslim community as well."

Throughout the country Catholic parishes and schools were affected in various ways by the war. Parishes everywhere have posted lists of parishioners or their relatives who are stationed in the gulf.

But among the hardest-hit Catholic parishes in the country are those of the Chaldean Catholic Diocese of St. Thomas the Apostle, based in the Detroit suburb of Southfield, Mich. Chaldean Catholics hail from Iraq, and virtually every U.S. member of the rite can list close friends and relatives facing daily fear of death from the massive allied bombing of Iraq.

When an allied attack on a Baghdad building killed more than 200 civilians Feb. 13, U.S. Chaldean Bishop Ibrahim N. Ibrahim bluntly and angrily rejected the U.S. military explanation that the facility was a military command bunker, not just a civilian air-raid shelter.

While U.S. officials repeatedly rejected that interpretation of the bombing raids, news released by Iraqi authorities of heavy civilian casualties provoked anti-American demonstrations in many Muslim countries and increased fears among religious leaders that relations between Christians and Muslims would be one of the indirect casualties of the war.

U.S. Jesuit Father Thomas Michel, the Vatican's top official for religious relations with Muslims, said Feb. 15 that the war was reinforcing Muslim feelings that "the West wants to destroy Islam" and causing a growing Third World backlash of anti-Americanism.

Some racial bars falling in South Africa

By Laurie Hansen

Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Newborns at City Park Hospital in Cape Town, South Africa, no longer are classified officially as black, white, Indian or colored.

Now they're just babies.

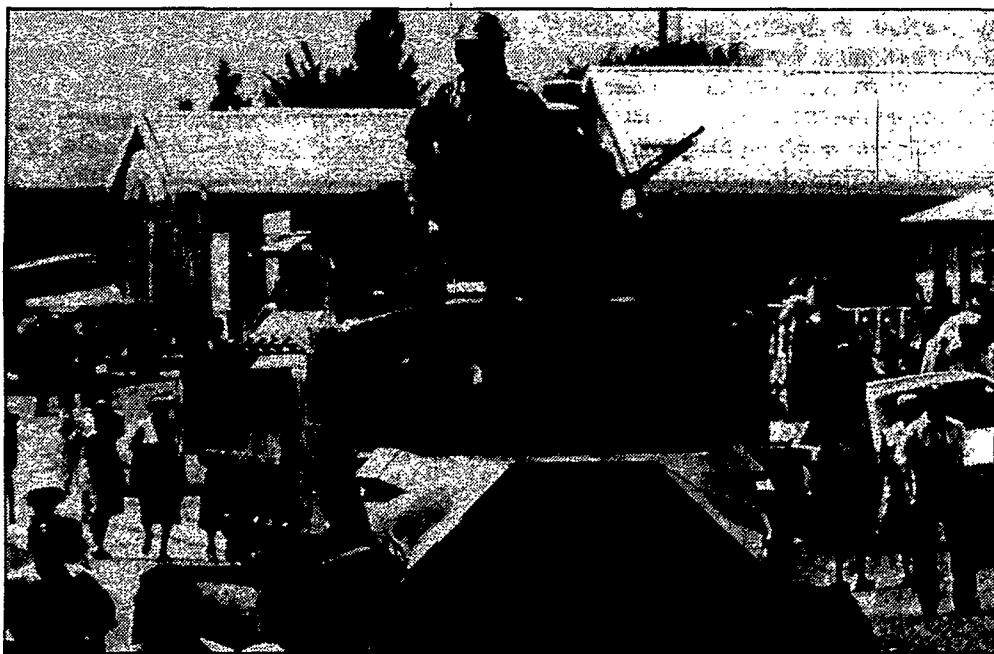
The hospital policy change came after South African President F.W. de Klerk's Feb. 1 announcement in Parliament that the Population Registration Act, which required racial classification, would be repealed.

De Klerk, proclaiming the final dismantling of "the cornerstone of apartheid," also said he would seek the repeal of two other major apartheid laws — the Group Areas and Land Acts — that determine which races may live where and limit land ownership for blacks.

De Klerk's speech, the equivalent of a U.S. president's State of the Union address, was interrupted with jeers and cries of "traitor" from white-opposition members of the Conservative Party. Some were forcibly ejected from Parliament, prompting a walkout by the rest of the 41 party members.

Ezekiel Pajibo, a specialist on South Africa at the Washington-based Africa Faith and Justice Network, told Catholic News Service Feb. 14 that a repeal of race classification will mean drastic changes for a new generation of South Africans.

"Its effect is to take away the stigma of being black in South Africa," said Pajibo. "It means black children will grow up in a better environment, will be allowed into better schools," he said.



AP/Wide World Photos
An armored vehicle patrols the strife-torn township of Bekkersdal, South Africa, on Feb. 7.

"For the first time," he said, young South African blacks may be able to escape the "psychological damage" that occurs when "you see yourself as a human being, then find you are not treated as such, and finally you begin to demean yourself."

The South African bishops issued a statement Feb. 5 congratulating de Klerk for his plan, but expressing concern that the president did not address the issue of South Africa's draconian security laws, or deal with the release of political prisoners and the return of exiled opposition members.

Robert A. Dumas, U.S. bishops' policy adviser on African and Western European affairs, told CNS Feb. 14 that the reforms "get to the heart of apartheid." Dumas backs the South African bishops'

position that sanctions against South Africa be continued. Referring to African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela, he commented: "They say Mandela was freed, but even with the reforms he (as a black African) can't vote and could be arrested and held without charges."

The Bush administration has said that if South Africa keeps its promise to release all political prisoners by April 30 it will ask Congress to allow resumption of some trade with South Africa.

If Congress doesn't object within 30 days, the administration can lift the sanctions.

Yet all is not rosy in South Africa, Pajibo cautions. Security police crackdowns in black townships continue as does imprisonment without due process, he said.

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