

# Scholars: Raid on Waco sets a deadly precedent

By Carol Zimmermann  
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The poor handling of the raid and assault on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, established a dangerous precedent for the government to take action against religious groups, according to a group of scholars.

The 51-day standoff between Branch Davidians and U.S. federal agents ended with a deadly fire on April 19 that killed at least 75 members of the Waco-based cult, many of them children.

In late September, the U.S. Treasury Department released a report that was highly critical of the initial raid on the compound conducted Feb. 28 by the agency's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. The report outlined how federal agents made fatal mistakes and lied about them. It also said that some negotiators believe the standoff could have ended peacefully.

A report released Oct. 8 by the U.S. Justice Department was not so critical of the operation and concluded that neither Attorney General Janet Reno nor any FBI official made any mistake during the standoff. Instead, it placed sole blame on Branch Davidians and their leader, David Koresh.

Religious scholar James Tabor at an Oct. 15 briefing in Washington disagreed with the new report, saying, "those people (cult members) are dead and they didn't need to be."

Tabor, an associate professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, was in contact with Koresh during the siege. He contends

that the entire standoff would have ended differently if the FBI had more seriously considered the "religious world view" of the Branch Davidians.

"People say to me, 'Why worry about what could have been?'" he told reporters during the briefing.

What might have been is what makes him angry, he said. "I'm not speculating when I say that David Koresh was coming out."

Tabor insists that Koresh did plan to come out of the compound but only after he finished writing his manuscript on the seven seals as described in the Book of Revelation. The seals have to do with hidden prophecies about the end of time.

When Tabor received Koresh's first part of the manuscript, he took it as a positive sign the standoff was ending. He said he and another religious scholar had been negotiating with Koresh by talking to him about his writings. But their negotiations ended when FBI agents reportedly told the scholars they had had enough of "Bible babble."

Because Koresh had not complied with federal authorities to come out of the compound, the FBI brought their tanks onto the compound April 19, hoping to force out occupants.

The Rev. Newton Malony, a Methodist minister and clinical psychologist, did not cast blame solely upon the federal agents for the tragedy at Waco. "We are all to blame," he said, for "simply letting it happen."

Like Tabor, he concluded that the FBI reacted hastily and should have been "better informed about the nature of involvement in such religious groups as the Branch Davidians."

Malony and other scholars noted that the allegations of child abuse occurring at the compound have never been proven.

Although Malony said he did not personally agree with the practices of the Branch Davidians, he said there was a danger in labeling religious groups as cults.

"I don't think we realize how many apocalyptic groups there are, convinced the world may end tomorrow and prepared (with ammunition) to fight the devil," he said.

He also told reporters that even groups of mainstream religions "might someday find ourselves among those accused of criminal deviance" simply for following nontraditional practices.

## Private blessing



AP/Wide World Photos

## Rochester priest sees off troops

Father James P. Jaeger blesses private Jose Meza of McAllen, Texas, on Oct. 10, while Meza waited to board troop transport planes to Somalia. The parochial vicar of St. Margaret Mary's Church in Irondequoit was in Rome, N.Y. to offer blessings and prayer books to members of Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry, based at Fort Drum.

## Caution marks daily life in Haiti

### CRS office is caught in middle of tense situation

By Bill Pritchard  
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — They watch out for one another and close up shop by mid-afternoon these days in the Haiti office of Catholic Relief Services.

The volatile political situation in the island-state has also blocked the CRS food program and forced the U.S. Catholic charity to bar business travel by its staff outside the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, said CRS country representative Douglas Greene.

"I'm looking out my window now, and there are not a lot of vehicles in the road," Greene said in an Oct. 15 afternoon telephone interview with Catholic News Service.

The office, located across the street from the presidential palace in downtown Port-au-Prince is "closing up early these days," he said. The staff members come in "around 7 (a.m.) and leave before 2 (p.m.)," he said.

"In the afternoons, the roads start

getting more deserted," he said, and there is sporadic gunfire. "It just kind of comes and goes."

"Right now it could be as normal as possible ... then all of a sudden these Toyotas could come by and people would scatter," he said. The reference to Toyotas is to pickup trucks full of gunslinging "attaches" — plainclothes police auxiliaries identified as being used by anti-democratic elements of the police and army leadership to terrorize the population.

Greene said that food destined for the agency's feeding project "has been delayed in the port for over a month" because of the disruption resulting from the turmoil caused by those opposed to the return of ousted president Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

He said CRS has changed the license plates on its vehicles from international plates to private to avoid attracting the attention of the "attaches."

CRS staff members also carry walkie-talkies to stay in contact with one another and rely, in part, on the kindness of acquaintances in influential places in case there is trouble with the authorities, he said.



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