

Leaders seek peace as war begins fourth year

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Religious leaders launched new peace efforts amid renewed fighting as the Bosnian war entered its fourth year in April.

"We find ourselves facing the greatest tragedy which has exploded in Europe since the end of the Second World War," Pope John Paul II said at his weekly general audience April 5.

He asked for prayers for the war's victims and said the church will continue to pray and work so that "this absurd conflict may end soon."

"Three years have passed, and people have still not understood that the way of war leads only to death and not to the construction of a people's future," he said.

He made his comments amid reports of a new outbreak of fighting along the northern and central fronts, prompted by the arrival of good weather.

A week earlier Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim leaders held a high-level interreligious conference in Vienna, Austria, to work toward resolving the Bosnian conflict.

Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick of Newark, N.J., said after his return from Vienna that he and other conference participants saw little hope of ending the war soon.

Held under auspices of the Austrian government and the Appeal of Con-

science Foundation, a New York-based interreligious agency, the March 28-30 conference called for a summit, possibly in Vienna, of the Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian presidents. The presidents of Serbia and Croatia had agreed beforehand to attend such a conference, with the foundation as facilitator.

While the Vienna conference was under way, Cardinal Vinko Puljic of Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, arrived in the United States for a 10-day, seven-city visit to meet with church leaders and urge the cause of peace in his homeland.

At a meeting with journalists in Washington March 30, he repeatedly emphasized that religion is not the conflict's source, but an unwilling participant dragged into the rhetorical cross fire.

That theme was echoed several times at an international Christian-Muslim conference in Washington April 5-6 at Georgetown University's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding.

Several speakers at the Georgetown meeting cited the Bosnian war as one of the prime examples today of conflicts in which the antagonists are repeatedly defined by their religious identity even though the conflict itself is rooted in ethnic, political, economic and other nonreligious factors.

"In the Balkans, Serb nationalists prepared the ground for their war by extensive public writings of numerous academics and journalists against the 'Muslim threat' in their midst," said one of

the conference speakers, Jorgen Nielsen, director of the Center for the Study of Islam and Christian Relations at Selly Oaks College in Birmingham, England.

The Bosnian war began in March 1992 when ethnic Serbs and elements of the Serb-dominated Yugoslav military who opposed Bosnian independence attacked Muslim Slavs and ethnic Croats in Gorazde, near Sarajevo, and in Neum, on the Adriatic Coast.

By April 7 of that year, when the United States and the European Community recognized Bosnia-Herzegovina as an independent state, fighting had spread to several other towns and cities including Sarajevo, where Serbs shelled the city's historic Muslim quarter.

Accompanying the three years of fighting have been mind-numbing reports of atrocities, from constant shelling of civilian populations to systematic rape of thousands of Muslim women by Serb fighters and campaigns of "ethnic cleansing" to rid whole areas of Muslims and Croats.

During his stop in Washington, Cardinal Puljic spoke at a forum at the Center for Strategic and International Stud-

ies. He called the international arms embargo on warring factions "a very immoral act" but said lifting it now would lead "to more destruction, to complete cataclysm."

He said the United States can help bring an end to the war. "They certainly influenced to stop the conflict between Croats and Muslims" in Bosnia last year, he said.

Archbishop McCarrick, who is chairman of the U.S. bishops' migration committee and their Ad Hoc Committee on Aid to the Church in Central and Eastern Europe, said the Vienna conference in March was the third meeting of religious leaders convened by the Appeal of Conscience Foundation to try to resolve the Bosnian conflict.

On the diplomatic front, officials of five Western countries, including the United States, began a series of meetings in London in early April to work on a new cease-fire plan. The group planned to travel to Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia for talks at the end of April.

Contributing to this story were John Thavis in Rome, Tracy Early in New York and Mark Pattison in Washington.

Gaza bombings kill eight



Reuters/RNS

An Israeli soldier runs past an Israeli passenger bus that was blown apart by a Palestinian suicide bomber April 9 near a Jewish settlement in the PLO-ruled Gaza Strip. Seven Israelis and an American college student from New Jersey were killed in the attack, which injured dozens more. Several hours later, a second bomber drove a car loaded with explosives into an Israeli convoy near another Jewish settlement.

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