

STATEMENT ON IRAQ

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As our nation and world face grave choices about war, peace, security and justice, this is a time for renewed prayer, continued moral reflection, and active and faithful citizenship. This is a time to reaffirm and raise again the serious ethical questions and concerns our Conference has expressed in a letter to President Bush last September and in a major statement of the full body of bishops last November.

We have no illusions about the behavior and intentions of, or dangers posed by, the Iraqi government. Once again, we renew our calls for the Iraqi leadership clearly to abandon efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction and to meet its obligations to destroy such weapons. We join with Pope John Paul II in insisting that Iraq make concrete commitments to meet the legitimate demands of the international community and to avoid war. The Iraqi regime has to recognize that it has not to date responded adequately to these demands and that it must act immediately and effectively to meet them, both to avoid armed conflict and to prove that it intends to change its ways.

We join with Pope John Paul in the conviction that war is not inevitable and that war is always a defeat for humanity. This is not a matter of ends, but means. Our bishops conference continues to question the moral legitimacy of any preemptive, unilateral use of military force to overthrow the government of Iraq. To permit preemptive or preventive uses of military force to overthrow threatening or hostile regimes would create deeply troubling moral and legal precedents. Based on the facts that are known, it is difficult to justify resort to war against Iraq, lacking clear and adequate evidence of an imminent attack of a grave nature or Iraq's involvement in the terrorist attacks of September 11. With the Holy See and many religious leaders throughout the world, we believe that resort to war would not meet the strict conditions in Catholic teaching for the use of military force.

In our judgment, resort to war in this case should have broad international support. As crucial decisions draw near, we join the Holy See in once again urging all leaders to step back from the brink of war and to continue to work through the United Nations to contain, deter and disarm Iraq. We hope and pray that leaders in Iraq, the United Nations and in our own land will hear and heed the persistent pleas of Pope John Paul II to take concrete steps to avoid war and build peace based on respect for international law and for all human life.

If the decision to use military force is taken, the moral and legal constraints on the conduct of war must be observed. This is expected of every civilized nation. It surely is expected of ours. We are threatened by regimes and terrorists who ignore traditional norms governing the use of force; all the more reason that we must uphold and reinforce them through our own actions. Any implied or express threats to defend against Iraq's weapons of mass destruction by using our own weapons of mass destruction would be clearly unjustified. The use of anti-personnel landmines, cluster bombs and other weapons that cannot distinguish between soldiers and civilians, or between times of war and times of peace, should also be avoided. In all our actions in war, including assessments of whether collateral damage is proportionate, we must value the lives and livelihood of Iraqi civilians as we would the lives and livelihood of our own families and our own citizens.

If there is armed conflict, we must be prepared for all of its implications and its aftermath. An already long-suffering Iraqi population could face terrible new burdens, and a region already full of conflict and refugees could see more conflict and many more refugees, with ethnic and religious minorities particularly vulnerable. A post-war Iraq would require a long-term commitment to reconstruction, humanitarian and refugee assistance, and establishment of a stable, democratic government at a time when the U.S. federal budget is overwhelmed by increased defense spending and the costs of war.

As pastors and teachers, we understand that there are no easy answers. People of good will may differ on how traditional norms apply in this situation. The gravity of the threat and whether force would be preemptive are matters of debate, as are the potential consequences of using or failing to use military force. We urge Catholics, especially lay men and women who are called to be leaven in society, to continue to think deeply about the choices we face, to review carefully the teaching of our Church and to speak out strongly in accord with their conscience. Our hearts and prayers go out especially to those who may bear the burden of these terrible choices -- the men and women of our armed forces and their families, the people of Iraq, and the leaders of our nation and world who face momentous decisions of life and death, of war and peace.

At times like these, we turn to the Lord and ask for wisdom and courage. We Christians are called to be sentinels of peace, the Holy Father reminds us. We join with him in urging Catholics to dedicate fasting on Ash Wednesday for the conversion of hearts and the long-range vision of just decisions to resolve disputes with adequate and peaceful means. In the days ahead, our community of faith is called to reflection and discernment, dialogue and action, and especially to prayer and worship. As we approach the Lenten season, let us pray and fast that our nation and world will find effective ways short of war to secure justice, increase security and promote genuine peace for all of God's people.

Note: This statement coincides with the release of liturgical and other pastoral and educational resources for dioceses and parishes to use as our nation prepares for a possible war. See www.usccb.org.