



Conference of European Churches • Conférence des Églises Européennes • Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen • Конференция Европейских Церквей

**STATEMENT ON THE MIDDLE EAST CRISIS
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Churches throughout Europe have reacted with distress and concern to the developing situation in the Middle East. Throughout the continent, church leaders have been urging their governments to bring pressure to bear on those responsible for the ongoing violence in the Middle East.

From almost the beginning of the conflict, there have been two areas on which European Church Leaders are agreed:

The need to release hostages.

European Churches have stressed that the release of all hostages throughout the region would be a significant step in working towards an end to hostilities

The need for an immediate cease-fire so as to prevent further civilian loss of life.

Since the beginning of this conflict, a whole nation, the nation of Lebanon, has been taken hostage. Violence has been inflicted upon it both by Hezbollah and by the Israeli military. Nor have citizens of Israel been immune from attack, as the citizens of Haifa and other places bear witness. Nor should the sufferings of the people of Gaza be overshadowed by the conflict in Lebanon.

The Conference of European Churches (CEC) joins with those churches which have spoken out on the conflict in the Middle East calling for an immediate cease-fire. The call for a cease-fire has up to now gone unheeded by those who have the power to effect it. It appears that neither the Israeli Government nor Hezbollah, nor those who stand behind the Israeli Government and those who stand behind Hezbollah, are willing to countenance a cease-fire until such time as their own military and political purposes are closer to being achieved. The victims of this strategy are not its authors but the hundreds of civilians who have been killed as well as the civilians, now more than half a million, who have been driven from their homes. Geopolitical policy is being made without regard to its impact on individual human lives. The already dubious phrase “collateral damage” has been stretched beyond all reason.

Conversations with a number of our member churches have revealed that they have been faithfully and persistently encouraging their own governments to press for an immediate cease-fire. **We commend our member churches for all that they are doing in this regard and urge them to continue their efforts through all the channels which are available to them.** CEC stands ready to assist in this by facilitating wider ecumenical representation from across Europe to strengthen representations by national churches and groups of churches. Through our office in Brussels, we are also closely monitoring the reaction of the EU to the present crisis and stand ready for dialogue with the EU at the appropriate moment.

As the situation has developed over the last few days, two particular needs have emerged:

The need for safe corridors to be provided for humanitarian aid. This is needed urgently and needed now if human tragedy on an even greater scale is to be avoided. CEC encourages its member churches who are in contact with their own governments to raise this issue with them as a matter of urgency so that their governments can in turn be encouraged to raise this urgently in the appropriate quarters.

The need to prevent the refugee crisis escalating out of control. The numbers of those displaced from their homes has exceeded the half million mark. If violence continues on the present scale for much longer, then that number is likely to grow considerably. The pressure which this displacement causes is falling disproportionately on countries which are least able to deal with this. Our contacts with the Church of Cyprus, a member church both of CEC and of the Middle East Council of Churches, has made us acutely conscious that this is particularly so in the case of Cyprus. Meanwhile, nationals from countries unable to assist in their evacuation find themselves stranded in Lebanon in potentially dangerous circumstances. We encourage our member churches to raise this issue with their own governments and to encourage them to bring appropriate pressure to bear on those engaged in combat.

The situation in the Middle East is developing rapidly on a day-to-day basis. By the time this statement is circulated, the situation may have changed dramatically and some of what we suggest may be out of date.

However, CEC wishes to make three suggestions for action to our member churches and to the wider world community which we believe will remain appropriate in the coming days and weeks:

To continue to promote moves to defuse the crisis in the region with immediate cessation of hostilities on both fronts and steps to restore stability and retrieve the comprehensive peace process.

With great appreciation for the extensive lobbying which has already been achieved, we call on our member churches to continue to work to influence their governments to work urgently towards this end.

Support for Humanitarian Assistance.

The Lebanese Government has declared Lebanon to be a “disaster country”. The Middle East Council of Churches, with whom we are in close contact, has itself set up an Emergency Relief Committee. More details of this on their website at www.mec-churches.org

Action by Churches Together (ACT) International has also been active in channeling funds to the area and has already been receiving funds from its supporting churches and other organizations for this purpose. More funds are needed to enable it to continue to respond with financial assistance. More details are on the ACT website at www.act-intl.org

Churches have already been generous in offering financial support. Even at this time when many are away from their posts, CEC hopes that member churches will urgently find ways to encourage among their own members giving towards the relief of very real need in the region affected by the present conflict

As already mentioned in this letter, CEC also hopes that member churches will impress on their own governments the pressing need for the opening up of as many safe corridors as possible for humanitarian aid. Equally, we encourage member churches to press for the issue of displaced persons, described above, to be addressed as a priority.

Prayer

As followers and servants of Jesus Christ, we believe that the power of the prayer of the faithful should never be underestimated. We encourage our member churches to call their own members to prayer in the face of the present situation. It may be a general call for individual Christians and individual Christian communities to pray at times of their own choosing. It may be a call for individuals and individual Christian communities to pray in common on a designated day. But pray for an end to violence and for a just peace we must; and so we encourage our member churches to renew the call to prayer among their own people.

Sunday, 6 August, will be kept by some of our member churches as the day on which we remember Christ’s Transfiguration. It is also the day on which sixty one years ago atomic bombs were dropped on the city of Hiroshima. It may be that some of our churches will find this an appropriate day on which to pray that God’s gift of peace may transfigure the scarred landscape of the Middle East, holding especially in our prayers the broken communities of Lebanon and of Gaza, as well as all those parts of Israel affected by bombardment.

In order to assist in this, the National Council of Churches in the USA has set up a website at www.seasonofprayer.org entitled “A Season of Prayer”. It is hoped that many churches throughout the world will find this to be a helpful resource.

Conclusion

CEC feels deep appreciation of all that its member churches are doing in order to try to encourage a peaceful resolution to the present situation in the Middle East. We stand ready to support those efforts in any way in which we can.

I end with words from the Psalms which even in these difficult times express the hope which is in us, that all times and ages belong to God

All the ends of the earth shall remember

And turn to the Lord;

And all the families of the nations

Shall worship before him.

For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations

(Psalm 22 vv. 27-28)