

BETHESDA FRIENDS MEETING
Religious Society of Friends
Bethesda, MD, USA

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PREVENTION AND PEACEFUL RESOLUTION OF INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS

An Epistle of Bethesda, Maryland, Friends Meeting

Dear Friends,

Bethesda Friends Meeting is moved to share with you this statement of concerns about the current state of violent conflict in the world and the challenges faced by members of the Society of Friends and other members of the international community. Our Meeting has spent more than two years considering appropriate responses to conflict in today's changing world in the light of our historic Peace Testimony.

Today's Historic Challenge

Our attention is urgently drawn to the large number of violent conflicts in the world today. Contrary to widespread expectations and hopes, the end of the Cold War did not usher in peace. While the threat of general nuclear war may have abated, new disputes have arisen involving cross-border invasions, ethnic and religious conflicts, humanitarian disasters, nuclear proliferation, and failed nation-states – in such widespread places as Haiti, Bosnia, Iraq/Kuwait, Somalia, Tajikistan, Rwanda-Burundi, Angola, and North Korea.

No consensus exists in the international community about how to address these problems. Neither the United Nations, other international organizations, individual nations, private nongovernmental groups, nor we as Friends have adequate, practical answers about the role the members of the international community should plan in such situations. In almost every case, it has been unclear what actions should be taken and by whom.

The UN and regional organizations have limited capability and insufficient resources. Nongovernmental organizations operating in conflicted countries can help but in limited ways. Some military forces, often serving in international police roles, can carry out logistical and peacekeeping functions short of the use of force, as well as provide self defense; but militaries too often support tyrannical, oppressive regimes, and violent aggression. Using traditional diplomacy to influence the action of other players is essential, but not sufficient.

It may take more than a generation to learn from experience and develop a consensus among the international community, or even significant parts of it, about ways of preventing, controlling and eliminating these violent conflicts. It may take even longer to address their underlying causes that grow out of social, economic, and political injustice and ethnic and religious divisions.

Living in this period of great change and uncertainty in international affairs, we see both opportunity and challenge for Friends to address these questions in ways that both draw on the spiritual experience of our tradition and make a practical contribution to the international community's search for a more peaceful world.

What Friends Have to Offer

Our testimonies call us to loving action, not retreat. As we seek to discern the movement of the Spirit in our daily lives and in the world, we want our experience of the living God to inform our actions and positions as citizens. We ask how Friends might take a more concerted, public stance on international conflict. We are eager for the Quaker voice to be heard in policy-making arenas and elsewhere, and for Friends to play a larger role in the search for new peacekeeping solutions.

Friends' beliefs and practices are especially relevant at this time. Our beliefs start with the teaching of Jesus who not only reminded his followers of the Mosaic law against killing, but went further to teach that we are now called to love as God loves; not only friends, but enemies as well. George Fox claimed that the Spirit of God within us would make such love possible and taught us to "live in virtue of the life and power that takes away the occasion of war" by changing our hearts and inward lives.

Our call to peacekeeping is closely related to our efforts to secure equal rights and justice for each person, as a natural result of the closeness of our testimonies to the equal value of each person in the love of God and the peacefulness of lives lived in God's love. Thus, Friends' efforts to prevent war emphasize building foundations in equality, and creating opportunities for economic and social development and ethnic and religious harmony.

Underlying all actions taken by Friends in support of our Peace Testimony has been the strong belief that the individual expression of the Testimony must be a matter of deep personal reflection and conscience. This has been true ever since George Fox replied to William Penn's questions by telling him to "wear thy sword as long as thou canst."

Because Quakers have translated the Peace Testimony into their lives in different ways, their peace-related practices include a broad range of approaches:

Many Friends have unconditionally opposed all forms of coercion, with their opposition taking many forms. Many have registered as conscientious objectors. Others have chosen jail rather than acknowledge a system of military registration. Still others have refused to pay taxes that will be used for military purposes. Some have followed their consciences to participate, as combatants and as non-combatants, in wars they believe the lesser of two terrible evils. And some have chosen non-violent protests and civil disobedience as their witness.

In the twentieth century, many Friends have turned to world governance as part of the solution to these urgent problems, supporting first the League of Nations and later the

United Nations as ways of resolving conflicts and promoting economic development and social justice. Since governments have long included the use of police power as an arm of governance, international governance is recognized by some to include international police powers as well. Others have emphasized the role of international assistance in promoting social and economic development.

Friends have served as mediators and behind-the-scene promoters of reconciliation among parties to conflicts. Friends have also been drawn to the development and use of conflict transformation and resolutions skills as tools.

Some Friends have accepted or would accept the threat or use of force in exceptional cases where force is to be used under UN or other international auspices to separate warring parties, protect a vulnerable population, end a situation of anarchy, or in some other way reduce the level of violence that would otherwise occur. For the most part, Friends have avoided adversarial roles, but occasionally have supported those who have been willing to use force against oppressive and unjust rulers.

Addressing the Future

Drawing on the strength of the Quaker peace tradition and the diversity of our historical role and expertise in peacemaking and peacekeeping, we believe that Friends should respond to the challenge of today's conflicts by seeking to play a larger role with others in the international community in search for solutions. To this end, we call ourselves and other Friends to pursue three lines of action:

General Search: To participate vigorously and engage with non-Quakers in a search for: (1) practical principles that, recognizing the preciousness of human life, will best promote the peaceful, nonviolent resolution of today's types of conflicts; (2) the means by which the long-term causes of these conflicts can be eliminated; and (4) the roles of the different members of the international community in dealing with these issues. We recognize the importance of preparing ourselves carefully and speaking out to as wide a range of people as possible, not just to those who already agree with us.

Immediate Tasks: To support the following immediate goals as part of our broader effort to dismantle and supplant the tools of war.

Use of diplomacy whenever possible to prevent or reduce the level of violence.

Support for Friends' Peace Teams and others similar programs.

Development of research and training addressing the peaceful resolution of ethnic and religious conflicts.

Continued dismantlement and destruction of nuclear arms under START I and II and negotiation of follow-on agreements.

Reduction of funds spent on military establishments and corresponding reductions in the sizes of military forces worldwide.

Elimination of biological and chemical weapons.

Banning of the manufacture, sale, export, and use of land mines, and support for the clearing of land mines.

Restrictions on the availability of weapons among civilians.

Recognition of the right of conscientious objection as a basic human right.

Phased reductions in the international trade in armaments, looking to its eventual elimination.

Establishment of military-free zones and countries, as in Costa Rica.

Reform and strengthening of the United Nations as a more effective instrument for international peacekeeping.

Continued Exploration and Discernment: As we continue to learn more from unfolding international events, we will seek divine guidance so that our peace witness is grounded in our spiritual lives as Friends. We seek the patience to wait and listen, and a spirit of love to enable us to be tender with one another in our separate partial and imperfect understandings. Among the questions that concern us are:

What is the relationship between peace and justice? How can injustice be resolved in those cases where violence seems unavoidable?

In which conflict, if any, is it justifiable for members of the international community to use or to threaten to use force, recognizing that sometimes doing nothing can itself lead to violence?

What is the role of the military and of an international police force in resolving these problems? When is it acceptable to use military organizations in nonmilitary roles such as humanitarian relief for droughts and epidemic conditions? In what circumstances should Friends support international peacekeeping forces, while seeking to imbue their work with a spirit that "takes away the occasion for war?"

What is appropriate treatment for war criminals and abusers of human rights?

We invite all Friends and others committed to peacemaking in this new era to join us in this search.