

United Nations  
Commission on Human Rights  
Special Session on Former Yugoslavia  
13-14 August 1992

Oral intervention

Commission of the Churches on International Affairs  
World Council of Churches

Mr. Chairperson,

As General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, whose member churches represent hundreds of millions of Christians of the Orthodox, Reformed and Anglican traditions throughout the world, and speaking, too, on behalf of our sister ecumenical body, the Conference of European Churches, I wish to share with you in the search for a solution to a situation which weighs heavily on all our hearts. It continues unabated even as I speak, causing untold suffering and misery to countless innocent victims.

The bitter battle raging now in Bosnia-Herzegovina is extremely complex and brutal. Rival claims to the territory escalate the violence: Serbian call for "ethnic cleansing", a Croatian call for an autonomous state within Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Muslim desire that Bosnia-Herzegovina should remain independent.

Large numbers of people are being forced to flee their homes with little hope of secure passage to a safe haven. According to reports we have been receiving from various church sources, well-armed Serbian operations, aimed at "ethnic cleansing", are accompanied by the establishment of many camps - for instance in Sanski Most, Banja Luka and Omarska near Prijedor. There, Croat and Muslim victims are humiliated, tortured and murdered daily. It is impossible to assess the number of those imprisoned or dead, since, as far as we know, no systematic investigation of the camps has been carried out. According to such reports, those who have been able to escape, or leave in the exchange of prisoners, tell of prisoners being kept in huge cages with no food or water, of systematic beatings, of sadistic torture and the shooting or slitting the throats of victims, as well as the rape of women and young girls, some only children.

Tragically, we have received similar reports from Serbian church sources of equally brutal treatment of Serbian prisoners by Muslims and Croats, in detention camps and torture chambers in Sarajevo itself, in the Kosevo stadium, Zetra Hall and the Central Prison, as well as in Zenica, Konjic, Tuzla, Pazaric, Hrasnica, Posanski and many other sites. It is estimated that between 35,000-40,000 Serbs are detained in these camps - chiefly women, children and old people. In addition Serbian women and young girls are being forced into prostitution in brothels at Konjic, Celebici and Sarajevo.



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Mr. Chairperson, these are urgent issues to be addressed. There is an alarming lack of concern expressed for the basic human rights of the desperate peoples of Bosnia-Herzegovina, on the part of many of the protagonists who do not even fight a conventional war. The adversary is reduced to a mere factor to be removed, an obstacle to ideological pretensions, and the coldblooded perpetration of the brutalities I have described is allowed. In addition, the world community and its relevant institutions - including the churches - have thus far been unable or unwilling to address the issue with any effectiveness. Negotiations about reaching a peaceful settlement must continue unabated. At the same time, we must not neglect the fate of those hundreds of thousands of people caught up in a war which they neither sought nor desired, but which is now threatening their very existence. Their communities and their homes, property and livelihood are being taken away from them. As individual human beings, they are systematically being assassinated or being forced into exile.

We refer so glibly to our commitment to human solidarity, spelt out in the Charter of the United Nations, and so urgently awaited by our sisters and brothers in former Yugoslavia. The priorities of the United Nations - and in particular of its Human Rights Commission - in this area must be the protection of human rights, not an escalation of the conflict. It will be a calamity if, because of our inability to act, military action is presented as the only alternative.

It is clear that in this situation, as in so many others, the failure to speak out in time and to take decisive action to safeguard the rights of individuals and communities is reaping disastrous consequences.

We are deeply concerned that this Commission, and the United Nations Security Council, have not yet taken decisive action. Why was information apparently suppressed? Is it not the consequence of our inaction up to now that military intervention is easier to justify as a means of responding to this human drama?

Mr. Chairperson, as churches we address a strong appeal to all those involved to respect basic human rights and internationally recognised humanitarian standards. We call urgently on this Commission to conduct and enable a full, systematic and impartial investigation of the camps where many people are held in inhuman and degrading conditions. Action must be taken, in accordance with international law, which will seek, not only to correct the flagrant violation of human rights occurring at this very moment, but above all to promote a political solution to this conflict by peaceful means.

We ourselves in the World Council of Churches and its sister ecumenical organizations stand ready and willing to give every assistance to the Commission in the pursuance of this aim. We



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continue to seek to bring together all religious bodies in the region, to remove religious passion from the conflict, and to encourage and maintain, in full cooperation with the churches in the area, meaningful, symbolic action in relief operations and in the upholding of human rights of the members of all the communities. We urge that these established contacts should be used and strengthened in the pursuit of that peaceful resolution of the conflict which we all so ardently desire.



14 August 1992

## FOR THE ATTENTION OF THE PRESS

WCC General Secretary Emilio Castro, also speaking on behalf of the Conference of European Churches, has called on the United Nations Human Rights Commission "to conduct and enable a full, systematic and impartial investigation of the camps where many people are held in inhuman and degrading conditions" in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Underlining the urgency of the situation during an oral intervention, <sup>yesterday</sup> at the Commission's special session in Geneva on Yugoslavia (13-14 August), Castro spoke of "an alarming lack of concern expressed for the basic human rights of the desperate peoples of Bosnia-Herzegovina on the part of many of the protagonists, who do not even fight a conventional war. The adversary is reduced to a mere factor to be removed, an obstacle to ideological pretensions, and the cold-blooded perpetration of brutalities... is allowed."

"In addition," Castro said, "the world community and its relevant institutions -- including the churches -- have thus far been unable or unwilling to address the issue with any effectiveness." Negotiations, he said, must continue, but "we must not neglect the fate of those hundreds of thousands of people caught up in a war which they neither sought nor desired... It will be a calamity if, because of our inability to act, military action is presented as the only alternative."

Castro acknowledged the complexity of the "bitter battle" in Bosnia-Herzegovina, noting that "rival claims to the territory escalate the violence: Serbian calls for 'ethnic cleansing', a Croatian call for an autonomous state within Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Muslim desire that Bosnia-Herzegovina should remain independent".

According to reports from church sources, he said, "well-armed Serbian operations, aimed at 'ethnic cleansing', are accompanied by the establishment of many camps", where "Croat and Muslim victims are humiliated, tortured and murdered daily". Although the number of victims "cannot be assessed in the apparent absence of any systematic investigation, those who have escaped the camps or left in prisoner exchanges "tell of prisoners being kept in huge cages with no food or water, of systematic beatings, of sadistic torture and the shooting or slitting the throats of victims, as well as the rape of women and young girls, some only children."

The WCC General Secretary said the Council has received similar reports of "equally brutal treatment of Serbian prisoners by Muslims and Croats... It is estimated that between 35,000-40,000 Serbs are detained in these camps - chiefly women, children and old people. In addition Serbian women and young girls are being forced into prostitution in brothels at Konjic, Celebici and Sarajevo."

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Castro said it is clear that "the failure to speak out in time and to take decisive action to safeguard the rights of individuals and communities is reaping disastrous consequences". Expressing concern that the Human Rights Commission and UN Security Council have not taken "decisive action", he also asked why information about detention camps "was apparently suppressed".

Fleeting the readiness of the WCC and other ecumenical bodies to assist in the search for a peaceful political solution, Castro said "we continue to seek to bring together all religious bodies in the region, to remove religious passion from the conflict and to encourage and maintain, in full cooperation with the churches in the area, meaningful symbolic action in relief operations and in the upholding of human rights of the members of all the communities."

On 5 August the WCC's Programme Unit on Sharing and Service increased an earlier appeal for humanitarian aid to victims of the fighting in the former Yugoslavia, asking for US\$650,000. The WCC also made a separate appeal for US\$160,000 for programmes of Hungarian Interchurch Aid to assist two thousand refugees who have fled to Hungary from Bosnia-Herzegovina. As part of the ecumenical response to the situation, the WCC is sending US\$100,000 to the Serbian Orthodox Church to assist in relief operations on the situation to Geneva, advise Serbian Orthodox and other local

The WCC is also sending a delegation to Geneva to discuss the situation and to coordinate ecumenical material aid in a co-ordinated way, taking into account the urgent needs in all republics, including Serbia" and to be prepared for immediate action if assistance in Bosnia-Herzegovina becomes possible. Humanitarian aid to refugees in Serbia should not be limited by United Nations sanctions, it reports said.

According to the appeal, the main volume of interchurch aid to the former Yugoslavia -- about US\$1 million -- has gone to Croatia through Lutheran, Baptist and Italian Protestant channels. Church aid to Bosnia-Herzegovina has been limited, though some has gone into Sarajevo by the UN airlift. In Serbia the WCC has supplied about \$10,000 and another \$50,000 worth of medicine through the Serbian Orthodox Church. According to initial plans for the six-month programme outlined in the new appeal, about half of the \$650,000 will go to setting up local camps near the place of origin of refugees in Serbia. Three consignments of medicines and about 40-50 metric tonnes of food a month will also be dispatched.

The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches, now 320, in more than 100 countries in all continents from virtually all Christian traditions. The Roman Catholic Church is not a member church but works cooperatively with the WCC. The highest governing body is the Assembly, which meets approximately every seven years. The WCC was formally inaugurated in 1948 in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Its staff is headed by general secretary Emilio Castro, a Methodist pastor from Uruguay.

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