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World Council of Churches slams Israel

By GEORGE CONGER



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Israel bears the burden of responsibility for the present crisis in the Middle East, the World Council of Churches has announced, following a meeting of its Executive Committee in Geneva from May 16-19.

The Christian Left's leading ecumenical organization stated Israel's actions towards the Palestinians "cannot be justified morally, legally or even politically."

The failure "to comply with international law" had "pushed the situation on the ground to a point of no return," they concluded.

The WCC condemned the killing of innocent civilians by "both sides" in the conflict and called for the Palestinians to "maintain the existing one-party cease-fire toward Israel" and asked Israel to base its security on "the equitable negotiation of final borders" with its neighbors.

However, the present disparities between Israel and Palestine were "appalling," the WCC said.

"One side is positioning itself to unilaterally establish final borders on territory that belongs to the other side; the other side is increasingly confined to the scattered enclaves that remain. On one side there is control of more and more land and water; on the other there are more and more families deprived of land and livelihoods.

On one side as many people as possible are being housed on occupied land; on the other side the toll mounts of refugees without homes or land. One side controls Jerusalem, a city shared by two peoples and three world religions; the other-Muslim and Christian-

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watches its demographic, commercial and religious presence wither in Jerusalem," the WCC said.

The WCC claimed a double standard was at work in the international community that favored Israel, saying, "The side set to keep its unlawful gains is garnering support from part of the international community. The side that, despairing at those unlawful gains, used legitimate elections to choose new leaders is being isolated and punished."

"Democracy must be protected where it is taking root," the WCC said, calling for a relaxation of American, British and EU sanctions against Hamas. "Peace must come soon or it may not come to either people for a long time," they concluded.

The WCC's Executive Committee called upon its 340 member churches in over 100 countries representing approximately 550 million Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant Christians to "share solidarity with people on both sides of the conflict," and to "use legitimate forms of pressure to promote a just peace and to end unlawful activities by Israelis or Palestinians."

It also asked its members to "find constructive ways to address threats experienced among the Jewish people, including the nature, prevalence and impact of racism in local, national and international contexts."

In March 2005, the WCC urged its member churches give "serious consideration" to pulling investments out of Israel and endorsed the 2004 decision by the Presbyterian Church of the United States to seek "phased selective divestment" from Israel. "This [Presbyterian] action is commendable in both method and manner, uses criteria rooted in faith and calls members to do the things that make for peace," the WCC said.

The Presbyterian Church will revisit its 2004 divestment decision next month at its 217th General Assembly in Birmingham, Alabama, in response to criticism that the divestment call was one-sided and ill-informed.

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