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Syrian Trappist nuns say Western powers and factional media fuel war propaganda

Asia News (05.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2p1BLES> - "When will they silence their weapons? And when will they silence so much partisan journalism? We, the people who actually live in Syria, we are really exhausted, nauseated by this global indignation that issues blanket condemnations of those who defend their lives and their land.

We have gone to Damascus several times in these months; we went after the rebel bombs had massacred a school, we were there a few days ago, the day after they had dropped 90 others from the Goutha, on the governmental part of the city. We have heard the stories of the children, the fear of leaving home and going to school, the terror of having to see their classmates still being ripped apart mid-air, or they themselves being ripped apart ... children who cannot sleep at night, for fear that a missile will crash through their roof. Fear, tears, blood, death. Are not these children worthy of our attention too?

Why did the public not bat an eyelid, why was no one indignant, why were no humanitarian or other appeals launched for these innocent people? And why only when the Syrian government intervenes, arousing the gratitude of Syrian citizens because at last they feel defended from so much horror (which we have seen with our own eyes and of which we hear), are we indignant about the ferocity of the war?

Of course, even when the Syrian army bombs there are women, children, civilians, wounded or dead. And we pray for them too. Not only the civilians: we also pray for the jihadists, because every man who chooses evil is a lost child, is a mystery hidden in the heart of God. And it is to God that we must leave judgment, He who does not want the death of the sinner, but that the sinner be converted and live.

But this does not mean that you do not call things by their name. And you can not confuse those who attack with those who defend themselves.

The attacks on civilians in Damascus, began from the Goutha area into the government-controlled part, and not vice versa. The same Goutha where – must we really remind people? - civilians who did not support the jihadists were put in iron cages: men, women, exposed outdoors and used as human shields. Goutha: the district where today the civilians who want to escape, and take refuge in the government-area, who dare to take advantage of the truce granted, are targeted by rebel snipers ...

Why this blindness on the part of the West? How is it possible for those who inform the public, even in the ecclesial context, to be so one-sided?

War is bad, oh yes, yes it is so bad! You do not need to tell the Syrian people this, a people who have seen the war rob them of their home for seven years now ... But we cannot be scandalized by the brutality of the war and keep quiet about who wanted war and still wants war today, or keep quiet about the governments that have poured their

powerful weapons, their military intelligence into Syria in recent years... not to mention the mercenaries deliberately allowed to enter Syria passing through neighbouring countries (many who went on to join Isis, the West should at least recognise these initials and what they mean).

We cannot keep quiet about the governments that have earned and gained from this war. Just look at what has happened to the most important Syrian oil wells. But this is just a mere detail, there is [something] much more important at stake here.

War is bad. But we have not yet reached the goal, where the wolf and the lamb will dwell together, and for those who believe, we must remember that the Church does not condemn legitimate defence; and even if she certainly does not wish for a recourse to arms and war, faith does not condemn those who defend their country, their family, not even their lives. You can choose non-violence, until you die. But it is a personal choice, which can only be brought to bear on the life of those who choose it, we cannot certainly ask a whole nation, an entire people for this.

No one, man or woman, who has a minimum of true humanity can wish for war. But today to say to Syria, to the Syrian government, not to defend its nation is against all justice: too often it is the only way to facilitate the task of those who want to plunder the country, massacre its people, as happened in these long years in which truces have been used above all to re-arm the rebels, and the humanitarian corridors to allow new weapons and new mercenaries to enter ... and how can we forget what atrocities have happened in these years in the areas controlled by the jihadists? violence, summary executions, rapes ... the stories we have heard from those who finally managed to escape?

Recently an article was brought to our attention: so many words spent on a single thesis, namely that all the Churches of the East are mere servants of power ... for convenience ... Some beautiful sentences to that effect, such as reverence bishops and Christians to the Syrian Satrap ... a way to delegitimize any appeal by the Syrian Church that reveals the other side of the coin, the one the mass media ignores.

Beyond any useless defence and polemics, let's make a simple reasoning, starting with a consideration. And that is that Christ - who knows well the heart of man, that is, knows that good and evil cohabit in each of us, wants his to be leaven in the dough, that is the presence that little by little, from the inside, makes a situation grow and orients it towards truth and goodness. It supports where support is needed, it changes where change is needed. With courage, without duplicity, but from within. Jesus did not support the sons of thunder, who invoked a fire of punishment.

Of course Syrian politics suffers from corruption (as in all the countries of the world) and there is sin in the Church (as in all the churches, as the Pope has so often complained)

But, appealing to the common sense of all, even non-believers: what is the real alternative that the West invokes for Syria? The Islamic State, Sharia? This in the name of freedom and democracy of the Syrian people? Don't make us laugh, actually, don't make us cry.

But if you think that in any case it is never legitimate to compromise, then for consistency we remind you, just to give one small example, that you would not have gas "without compromising with the strong powers", given that most companies have bought cheap oil from ISIS, across the bridge of Turkey: so when you drive a few kilometers, you do it thanks to the death of someone from whom this oil was stolen, consuming the diesel oil that was supposed to heat the house of some child in Syria..

If you really want to bring democracy to the world, make sure of your freedom from the satrapies of the West, and worry about your consistency, before intervening in that of others.

Last but not least, one should at least suspect the fact that if a Christian or a Muslim denounces the atrocities of jihadist groups it meets with a media silence, he finds only a rare echo in marginal agencies, while those who criticize the Syrian government gain the front pages of the big media. Does anyone remember an interview or an intervention by a Syrian bishop on some important newspaper in the West? One can disagree, obviously, but true information supposes different points of view.

Moreover, those who speak of an interested reverence of the Syrian Church towards President Assad as a defense of the short-sighted interests of Christians, proves that they do not know Syria, because in this land Christians and Muslims live together. It was only this war that hurt cohabitation in many parts, but in areas secured by the army (unlike those controlled by "others"), we still live together. With deep wounds to be tended, today unfortunately also with great difficulty to forgive, but still together. And good is good for everyone: I am witness to the many works of charity, relief, development run by Christians and Muslims together.

Of course, those who live here know this, even in the midst of so many contradictions, not those who write from behind a desk with many stereotypes of opposition between Christians and Muslims.

"Deliver us Lord from the war ... and deliver us from bad journalism ...".

With all due respect to journalists who really try to understand situations, and really inform us. But they will certainly not take us to task for what we write."

Netherlands joins UN Security Council to shine light on IS genocide

World Watch Monitor (11.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2r10m0c> - The Netherlands has just joined the UN Security Council as a temporary member for a year. Ten days before, its Foreign Minister, Halbe Zijlstra, published a letter explaining the Dutch government's response on the use by politicians of the term "genocide".

The Dutch Parliament had had several debates on the "genocide" committed by members of the Islamic State group (IS), and came to a consensus that it was not for politicians but for the international judicial system to make such a determination.

The Dutch government's response - the main points of which can be viewed at the bottom of the article - followed a joint legal opinion from the Advisory Committee on International Law Issues (CAVV) and the External Adjudication Adviser (EVA), which it had requested at the end of 2016.

"The Dutch government must be commended for its work on this topic. Hopefully those promises are translated into action and will be visible over the next year."

The Dutch government supported this legal opinion, and confirmed its reluctance to use the word "genocide" where such a determination had not been previously made by an international court or UN body.

However, concerning the atrocities perpetrated by IS against Christians and Yazidis, the Dutch government confirmed that it "is the opinion that sufficient facts have been established to judge that [IS] is most likely guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity". It added that the obligations under the 1948 UN Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide apply to IS's atrocities.

This declaration is late, in comparison with other actors. The opinion published by the Dutch government, relying on the joint legal opinion of CAVV and EVA, clarifies the approach to be taken by government and parliamentary officials concerning mass atrocities that may amount to genocide.

Additionally, the Dutch government indicated in its letter the possible direction of work, including: referral of the situation in Syria to the ICC; supporting the work of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, a new mechanism established by the UN General Assembly resolution to collect evidence of atrocities in Syria; and assisting the Investigative Team, a new mechanism established by the UN Security Council to collect evidence of IS atrocities in Iraq.

The Dutch government mentioned that it would further advocate focussing on atrocities perpetrated by other actors in addition to IS. Concerning Iraq, this position has been abandoned by other states for the sake of achieving consensus on the issue of IS.

But the Dutch government emphasised that the atrocities perpetrated by other parties must not be neglected and forgotten.

Analysis by Ewelina Ochab*

The Dutch government must be commended for its work on this topic. Hopefully those promises are translated into action and will be visible over the next year.

It should also be emphasised that apart from the commendable joint opinion of the CAVV and EVA, the Dutch government has had great assistance on the topic from MP Pieter Omtzigt, who represents the Netherlands at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and became a rapporteur on bringing IS to justice in late 2016.

His mandate included preparing a report outlining the options to bring IS to justice, and a resolution proposing recommendations to member states to the Council of Europe. The report and the resolution were adopted by the EU in late 2017.

Omtzigt will continue to hold his mandate for another year to follow up on the recommendations made in the EU resolution, as he looks to ensure the Dutch government makes a firm stance at the UN Security Council.

He has said he wants to ensure IS militants are prosecuted for their involvement and complicity through an international or hybrid tribunal (a domestic court with significant support of international expert and judges).

The UK recently claimed that it was not "crucial" to make such a determination of genocide, and that it has fulfilled its international obligations by working with the Iraqi government on UN Security Council Resolution 2379, establishing the Investigative Team to collect the evidence of IS atrocities in Iraq, and has been providing humanitarian assistance. However, there is more to the story.

Indeed, the determination of genocide should not be crucial to trigger the obligations under the 1948 UN Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide; historically, however, this has been done first after the use of the word "genocide".

The UK was the leading force behind the UN Security Council Resolution 2379 that passed successfully on 21 September 2017. However, the resolution proposes that Iraqi courts will deal with prosecutions of the perpetrators. The question is whether Iraqi courts can do so.

British peer David Alton questioned the UK government on what checks it had done before proposing, by way of Resolution 2379, Iraqi courts prosecute IS militants. The UK government responded that it was currently considering the issue, namely after the resolution was adopted and not in preparation of the resolution, to allow it to propose the best solution for bringing IS to justice.

If, in fact, Iraqi courts do not have the capacity, it means that an international or a hybrid tribunal will need to be established, as proposed by Omtzigt. Furthermore, the UK has failed to prosecute returning IS fighters. According to the information submitted by the UK to the Council of Europe, as of early 2017 only 101 individuals connected with IS atrocities have been convicted, which may be just the tip of the iceberg, considering that 425 are said to have returned to the UK.

The UK has been actively supporting the work of the Global Coalition against IS, a coalition of 74 countries with the aim to tackle IS on all fronts. However, at the same time, the assistance provided to the victims of the IS genocide is concerning. The UK government confirmed that it is funding 171 projects in the Christian areas affected by IS atrocities and 80 projects in the Yazidi areas. While this may sound reassuring, the extent, impact, and benefit of these projects is unclear. I attempted to obtain this information by way of Freedom of Information request but have not received word back yet.

However, as indicated in the letter from the Dutch government, the determination of genocide is a vital step towards the fulfilment of the obligations to prevent and punish.

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