

'The distressing situation prevailing in Pakistan'

A statement by the Rt Revd Samuel Azariah, Bishop of Raiwind, in the Church of Pakistan. Bishop Azariah is an executive committee member of the World Council of Churches.

I am certain some of you are following media reports of the distressing situation prevailing in Pakistan. As I ponder over the crisis facing our country, I am constrained to reflect on how prophetic and appropriate the response of the Central Committee, in the year 1999, was to the call of the 8th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) on the Decade to Overcome Violence. As we near the end of the Decade, Pakistan is engulfed in a spiral of never ending violence. In the year gone by there were at least 50 suicide bombings that ripped through the country and culminated in the tragic and brutal killing of Benazir Bhutto. These bombings killed 770 people out of which 58 per cent were civilians. According to a report put together for 2007, by the Pak Institute for Peace Studies, the country has witnessed 1442 violent incidents including border skirmishes causing nearly 9000 casualties, 3448 of them fatal.

The common belief amongst the people is that the bombings are the work of either Islamic extremists, belonging to Al Qaeda and the Taliban, or rogue elements close to the military establishment. Whoever is responsible for these heinous crimes, the intent is clearly to subvert through terror the democratic process in order to negate the will of the people.

The New Year has not brought any relief. The massive suicide bombing in Lahore on the 10 January, left twenty policeman dead and over sixty others critically injured, indicating that if this dangerous trend is allowed to continue it will wreak havoc and tear the country apart through senseless and ruthless acts of violence. The writ of the state has weakened by the day, as those behind these barbaric crimes strike with impunity where and when they like. The sense of uncertainty and insecurity has become all-pervasive among the people.

It is therefore not surprising that a debate is going on in international circles, whether external intervention in Pakistan to challenge the growing power of the Islamic extremists is the only option to bring the situation under control and save the country from anarchy and total collapse or would it make matters worse. In response to such thoughts that are floating around President Musharraf in a recent interview to The Strait Times of Singapore, is reported to have said: 'Any unilateral action by the US led coalition forces against militants in the border region with Afghanistan will be regarded as an invasion.'

The government of Pakistan is presently engaged in military operations against militants in the tribal areas of Waziristan, on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan and in Swat. Right or wrong people believe that this is an American war and the Pakistan army is killing its own people at the call of the Americans.

As a result, there is much anger and hatred against the West. A columnist in the newspaper Daily Times aptly put it: 'The favourite enemy (of Pakistanis) of course is the West or specifically the United States whose evil hand is seen in everything from the moral failings of Pakistani politicians to the brutality of army expeditions.' This is true. The fact that presently our tribal areas are swarming with militants, foreign and home grown, is a result of our own disastrous defence and foreign policies. The popular viewpoint however, that the West and the US are responsible for all our ills resonates well with the people. This of course has repercussions on the Christians and the Church in Pakistan as we are considered a legacy of the West because of our colonial heritage

In the province of Baluchistan too, the military is fighting a full-fledged insurgency that has resulted in heavy casualties on both sides. This military confrontation in the provinces of North West Frontier and Baluchistan, bordering on Afghanistan does not bode well for the country. Apart from the Islamic factor it has given rise to ethnic tensions. The deployment of military in the province of Sindh following the loot & plunder in the aftermath of Benazir' burial has further compounded the situation.

Political instability has had an adverse impact on the economy. A recently released report issued by the State Bank of Pakistan warns that the continuing political turmoil can tip the economy into a recession. Presently, the people are faced with shortage of essential commodities like wheat flour, which is the staple diet of the common people, sugar, increase in prices of petrol. In addition, there is an all time low in electricity deficit that has necessitated a daily eight hour load shedding across the country.

The government has lost all credibility and is virtually crippled. The major political parties are of the view that the elections will not be free and fair. They have called for President Musharraf to step down and constitute a government of national unity and reconciliation acceptable to all the parties with a mandate to carry out elections & hand over power to the elected representatives of the people. This however is unlikely to happen because the US-led coalition and the Pakistan military establishment continue to support Musharraf. The US administration is of the view that Musharraf is indispensable to the war on terror and Pakistani generals are not ready to

share power with civilians because over the years they have accumulated huge economic, commercial and political interests.

Meanwhile, judges, lawyers, media people and civil society groups continue to organise peaceful protests for restoration and release of judges who were deposed and are presently in detention. The demand of the civil society is that there can be no free and fair elections without an independent judiciary. The movement in recent days has been eclipsed by the surge in violence that has taken place all over the country.

The Muslim calendar month of Moharrum has just started. This is the month when Shiites celebrate the Martyrdom of Hazrat Ali. It is also a period when tempers run high and there are violent clashes between the Shiites and Sunnis. Given the present circumstances, one hopes that the elections scheduled for the 18 February can take place peacefully without more violence and bloodshed.

Human life is a gift of God. As such violence and acts of terrorism against innocent civilians are a sin against God and are contrary to His values of peace, love, forgiveness and compassion. As people of faith we are committed to universally condemn all forms of violence, particularly the type that inflicts indiscriminate death and injury on civilians. Our country is passing through a very difficult period in its history. We seek your prayers to the one loving and merciful God that he may bring our people consolation and invest in them the hope and courage to face up to the challenge of healing and reconciliation.

I am therefore writing to request you to appeal to your governments, multilateral organisations and the media to ensure to call on the government of Pakistan to ensure:

- Free and fair elections are held according to schedule;
- Restoration of democratic process and rule of law;
- Release of all judges and lawyers;
- Restoration of a free press and an independent judiciary;
- Safety and security of all citizens;
- Immediate steps to apprehend those responsible for acts of terror.