

WHERE ARE THE BLESSED PEACEMAKERS?

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Peace and nuclear disarmament are the focus of three international days of observance in August -September, including the International Day of Peace on 21 September. As our nightly news reminds us, conflict is all to present in our world destroying lives and displacing people.

Two UN agencies have recently warned in a report submitted to the UN Security Council that conflicts affecting 17 countries have driven millions of people into severe food insecurity and are hindering global efforts to eradicate malnutrition.

The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Food Program (WFP) say conflicts have now pushed over 56 million people into either "crisis" or "emergency" levels of food insecurity.

Topping the list is **Yemen**, where 14 million people - over half the population - are now in a state of hunger crisis, and **Syria**, where 8.7 million people - 37 percent of the pre-conflict population - need urgent food, nutrition and livelihoods assistance. A staggering 89 percent of all Syrian refugees currently in **Lebanon** require urgent food, nutrition and livelihoods assistance.

In **South Sudan where the situation is rapidly deteriorating** 4.8 million people - some 40 percent of the population - are in need of urgent food, nutrition and livelihoods assistance.

"Conflict undermines food security in multiple ways: destroying crops, livestock and agricultural infrastructure, disrupting markets, causing displacement, creating fear and uncertainty over fulfilling future needs, damaging human capital and contributing to the spread of disease among others. Conflict also creates access problems for governments and humanitarian organizations, which often struggle to reach those in need," notes the report.

The most recent estimates suggest that approximately half of the global poor now live in states characterized by conflict and violence. "Addressing hunger can be a meaningful contribution to peacebuilding," the report states.

The call to be peacemakers

For Christians, peace is a key theme in the Gospel. We are called to love our neighbour and in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:9, Jesus reminds 'Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God'.

We need to raise our voice for a renewed commitment to peacemaking. Australia has a proud history of deploying personnel to UN peacekeeping operations. Next year will mark 70 years since Australia deployed personnel under UN auspices to the Dutch East Indies. Yet we are a small contributor for a country of our size and influence internationally and Australia's numbers are set to decline.

Australia's fading commitments

Australia's falling commitment to peacekeeping unfortunately echoes the sharp cuts to overseas aid. A cut of \$3.7 billion over 4 years to the aid program leaves Australian aid at 0.22% of GNI, the lowest level in 60 years and well short of the UN target of 0.7%.

Much of the 'savings' may well have been spent on the Manus Island detention centre, recently declared illegal by the Papua New Guinea Supreme Court. Reports have emerged that the Centre has cost the Australian tax payer a whopping \$2 billion, averaging at \$1 million per detainee! What shameful misplaced priorities.

Instead of detaining asylum seekers indefinitely at great expense, Australia needs to find a renewed commitment to address the root causes of conflict, to maintain our record of providing peacekeepers to regions of conflict and to assisting the victims of violence. If there is no respite in the conflict, human suffering will increase as too will the numbers of asylum seekers seeking refuge.

Let us all pray that we may be peacemakers.

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