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Just say 'no' to war, church leaders urge Chretien: Negotiations seen as way to resolve differences with Iraq

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Canada's top church leaders said "no" to war in Iraq on Wednesday, and called on Prime Minister Jean Chretien to press for peace talks instead.

"War drums threaten to drown out both law and compassion," they said in a letter to the prime minister.

"This is a time for intense diplomacy and face-to-face negotiations, not for missiles and high-altitude bombing," said leaders of 16 of the nation's largest churches.

"Yes, the world is faced with a dangerous situation, in Iraq and in the Middle East region as a whole. But non-military approaches to those grave problems are possible and infinitely preferable to war," said the letter, which was signed by Bishop Jacques Berthelet, the Catholic bishops' president; the Right Rev. Marion Parry, the United Church's moderator; Archdeacon Jim Boyles, the Anglican general secretary, and the heads of Lutheran, Baptist and other churches.

Rev. Mark Lewis, moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Canada, claimed Iraqi civilians are suffering and dying because of sanctions imposed after the Gulf War, and many more would suffer if the U.S. attacked Iraq.

"The idea of going in with military force is simply overkill and not necessary."

Lewis said U.S. President George W. Bush apparently wants to attack Iraq to control Middle Eastern oil resources and ensure "Western civilization and religion will dominate."

"It is not in the mind of George Bush that people who come from different backgrounds and religions can live together," said the Presbyterian moderator.

Dale Hildebrand, who monitors Iraq for KAIROS, the Canadian churches' ecumenical justice coalition, linked Saddam's intention to acquire nuclear weapons with Israel's possession of them. He said that, although Bush cites Iraq's failure to comply with UN resolutions as a reason for military action, it is not the only country in the region that has ignored the UN's call for disarmament in the region.

"Israel has nuclear weapons as well. It shouldn't come as a surprise that other countries in the region will also want to develop nuclear weapons."

British church leaders, including the new head of the

worldwide Anglican church, Archbishop Rowan Williams, have also spoken out against Prime Minister Tony Blair's intent to join the U.S. in action against Iraq. "The removal of unjust regimes without reference to international law is opening a Pandora's box," said Williams.