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US bishops: Possible Syria attack 'deeply troubling'

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Washington — The main leadership group of U.S. Catholic bishops has called for the American government not to launch a military strike in Syria, saying the lack of international and domestic consensus on the matter is "deeply troubling."

Echoing earlier statements made by individual bishops, the U.S. bishops' conference made the call Tuesday in a statement from its administrative committee, a 36-member group of bishops that directs the work of the conference.

"Instead of employing armed force, our nation should work with the international community and direct all of its considerable diplomatic capabilities to initiate dialogue and negotiation," the bishops write in their letter, made available by the bishops' conference.

"The use of force is always a last resort, and it should only be employed by legitimate authority in accordance with international norms," they continue. "The lack of international and domestic consensus in this case is deeply troubling. Recent international proposals to secure and destroy Syria's chemical weapons deserve serious consideration, evaluation and encouragement."

Tuesday's statement by the bishops' committee follows earlier statements by Des Moines, Iowa, Bishop Richard Pates and New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan. Pates is the head of the bishops' committee on international justice and peace; Dolan is the president of the bishops' conference.

Last week, Dolan and Pates co-wrote separate letters to Obama and to all members of Congress, asking them to pursue dialogue instead of military intervention. A military strike, they said in their letter to Obama, would be "counterproductive [and] will exacerbate an already deadly situation."

Tuesday's letter from the bishops' administrative committee, which is made up of the bishops' conference's committee heads, who direct the work of the entire conference between its twice-yearly plenary sessions, is similar to Dolan and Pates' earlier statement, borrowing several paragraphs.

"We have heard the urgent calls of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, and our suffering brother bishops of the venerable and ancient Christian Churches of the Middle East," the bishops' said Tuesday, as Dolan and Pates had written earlier.

"As one, they beg the international community not to resort to military intervention in Syria," the bishops continue. "They have made it clear that a military attack will be counterproductive, will exacerbate an already deadly situation, and will have unintended negative consequences."

Tuesday's statement from the bishops comes hours before President Barack Obama is to address the nation Tuesday evening on the matter in a televised address from the White House. Obama has asked Congress to authorize the launching of a military attack against Syrian President Bashar Assad's government, which the U.S. government says was responsible for an Aug. 21 attack in Syria that included use of chemical weapons.

Events surrounding the Syrian matter were evolving quickly Tuesday afternoon, with several news outlets reporting the Syrian government had agreed to disclose the location of its chemical weapons stockpiles and put them under international control.

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Auxiliary Bishop Denis Madden of Baltimore, who heads the bishops' office for ecumenical and inter-religious affairs, told *NCR* on Monday that members of the bishops' administrative committee were planning to watch Obama's address to the nation Tuesday night and may issue remarks following the president's address.

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