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Update on the Iraq crisis and the rise of the Peace Movement

NEWS – Sydney creates history in largest Australian protest ever!

More than a quarter million people, or one in every 12 people in Sydney, crammed into Hyde Park and surrounding streets in an anti-war "pre-emptive strike" that stunned even the most optimistic.

The Sydney protest carrying the message "no war on Iraq; bring the troops home" followed record numbers in Melbourne and other parts of Australia and was part of an unprecedented global day of protest involving over 10 million people in over 600 cities and towns around the world.

Even as the march began people were still pouring in, mostly on foot, as train and bus services were unable to cope with the demand. In near chaos police and organisers were forced to divert marchers to the Domain, a larger nearby park.

Meanwhile back in Hyde Park speakers were cheered and applauded as they spoke out against the logic and morality of the war. Genan Dadoun, spokesperson for the Muslim Women's Association, said: "We do not need [the Government's anti-terrorist] fridge magnets to protect us from terror. If we want to reduce the amount of terror in the world, we should ... stop participating in the terror!"

Reverend Ray Richmond, of Sydney's Wayside Chapel, said that unlike any other single issue the Christian churches were united with "one voice of condemnation" against a war.

Never has there been such a massive outpouring of opposition to a war even before it officially began. As the final speaker John Pilger said, "Our movement is too big to be defeated."

The organiser of the event, the Walk Against the War Coalition, is expected to build on this momentum leading towards the next major weekend of protest planned for 15/16 March with a focus on local actions.

ACMICA is a member of the Coalition and actively supports its work through local communities.

NEWS – Catholics increasingly vocal: attacking Iraq is unjust and immoral

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Anan visited the Vatican on Tuesday, and spoke privately with Pope John Paul II primarily over the issue of a possible war in Iraq.

An official Vatican statement said that the Pope emphasised the role of the UN in ensuring respect for international law and expressed his hope for "just and effective solutions" to the crisis over Iraq that should avert further grave suffering for that population, already tried by long years of embargo."

The Vatican has been a vocal opponent of any war against Iraq, saying there is no moral justification for a pre-emptive strike. It has also raised concerns that Muslims would see the war as a crusade against them by Christians.

Meanwhile in Australia a group of prominent Christians, including three bishops, have signed an open letter to Prime Minister John Howard urging him against attacking Iraq.

"War and international sanctions have taken a heavy toll on the innocent people of Iraq – to unleash the devastation of war on them now would be immoral," the letter said. "Please do not commit Australian troops to the Gulf. Instead, work for peaceful resolution of this conflict."

And in Melbourne the Catholic Commission for Justice Development and Peace believes that applying "Just War" criteria to the present situation in Iraq shows that a war on Iraq may be morally unjustifiable – even with a UN backing.

Executive Officer of the Commission, Marc Purcell said that Iraq poses no imminent threat to the US, the UK or Australia, a condition necessary to justify a war in self-defence.

"The evidence of possession of weapons of mass destruction presented so far has been unconvincing as grounds for war. Rather a policy of containment and ongoing UN inspections provides a reasonable alternative to war. A just cause is lacking", he said.

Source:

Religious leaders in anti-war plea to Howard

<http://www.cathnews.com/news/302/73.php>

Catholic Commission for Justice Development and Peace (Melbourne) Media Release

<http://www.aapmedianet.com.au/scripts/DisplayRelease.dll?id=335151>

Statement on Holy Father's Audience with Kofi Annan, 19 Feb 03

http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/vis/dinamiche/c0_en.htm

Remember – in the event of war ...

In the event of war (on the day we hear the news) there will be **emergency protest rallies** in capital cities and regional areas all over Australia:

Adelaide: 5pm, Parliament House steps

Brisbane: 5pm, Contact: Queensland Peace Network on 3846 2468 or gavins@qcu.asn.au

Canberra: 5pm at Garema Place

Hobart: 5pm, contact Peace Trust - David Burn david@lhmu.org.au 6224 9288

Melbourne: 5pm at State Library

Perth: 5pm outside the GPO in Forrest Place

Sydney: 5pm Sydney Town Hall

"METROPOLITICS" REFLECTIONS ON THE PEACE RALLIES

Dr George Morgan reflects on the cultural significance of the peace rallies

Mass demonstration like Sunday's anti-war protest can have an alchemic effect on a city like Sydney. The urban arteries and capillaries normally host the random and individualistic movement of people and vehicles. They are designed for those involved in commerce and consumption, but unlike the metropolises of the ancient world, not for participatory democracy. The transport routes – railways, clearways and busways – are calibrated to absorb the waves of shoppers and workers morning and evening. The skyscrapers and malls inhale and exhale vast numbers each day. But huge protests disrupt the set routines, defy the plans of planners and the city becomes a different kind of place: pedestrianised, pandemonious, percussive.

Nobody can completely control the protesting crowd nor anticipate its movements. The official lines of containment are ruptured and the people flow into prohibited places. In

New York mounted police sought to herd the demonstrators behind the barriers, and arrested some. Their counterparts in London tried in vain to prevent latecomers for entering the vast

It's at times like this that you become aware of how fragile the hold of the state is on public order, how much it depends on us acknowledging the rule of law.

crowded expanse of Hyde Park. In Sydney instead of walking on an orderly circular route all of the city streets are deluged with marchers. Up above them were people pressed to the glass of arcades, department stores, offices and cafes, many waving their support.

It's at times like this that you become aware of how fragile the hold of the state is on public order, how much it depends on us acknowledging the rule of law. What power do a few hundred police have against the hundreds of thousands who marched in the world's big cities? These were peaceful protests but imagine how much the bourgeoisie feared the revolutionary crowd in nineteenth century Europe – in Paris in 1848 and 1870 for example. French historian Georges Rude observed that a protesting crowd is more than the sum of its parts. There is some vast and elemental about it. It yields up a feeling of solidarity and community the like of which is rarely available to us in modern alienated life.

This crowd was broad and diverse. Christians marched alongside Muslims, conservative-looking families from the suburbs rubbed shoulders with young green bohemians from the inner city. The two very pregnant women I saw with their bare midriffs painted with peace motifs and transported me to Haight Astbury in the late sixties. Red raggers and pamphleteers ply their trade around the edges of the crowd, cadres from the various Trotskyist and Leninist parties distinguished only by arcane points of doctrinal difference. Placards proclaim the anger and display the wit ('Somewhere in Texas a village is missing its idiot' 'Is Howard the Bush Kangaroo?' 'War is SO Twentieth Century' 'Coalition of the Willies'). I paint the back of an old shirt with 'Coalition of the Unwilling' and see two others had the same idea for their banners.

We are gathered in Hyde Park and set off marching on a circular route through the city streets, Elizabeth, King, George, Market (was it?) and back to the park. There is no way of gauging the dimensions of the demonstration, no panoptic vantage point, just the Mexican waves of noise coarsing along the streets. The head of the march snaked through the canyons of sandstone, concrete and glass only to return to point of origin and the delicious revelation that most of its own body has yet to uncoil and commence the journey.

The drummers, whistlers, t-shirt merchants and street performers gave this muggy Sunday afternoon in February a festive feel. By late afternoon most of us had crowded onto the buses and trains and left the city once again to its customary order. The evening news bulletins revealed us to be part of a huge global movement, possibly the start of the largest expression of mass public dissent in human history.

But amidst this dissident euphoria our thoughts should go out to the people of a much bigger city than ours, of Baghdad who from mid March will spend their nights cowering in fear as the smart bombs strafe their streets and neighbourhoods, reducing their homes to rubble. If we can feel for those who lost their homes and loved ones in the Canberra bushfires we should be able to feel for the Iraqi parents lying in the dark trying to comfort their crying children and wondering what sort of world it is they have brought them into.

Dr George Morgan is a lecturer at the School of Humanities, University of Western Sydney. Published with permission.

"PLAYING AT KARUNA SEVANA" REFLECTIONS FROM SRI LANKA

Rachel Galea reflects on her experiences in Sri Lanka where she is volunteering on a joint ACMICA-Centre for Religion and Society community development project.

Morning comes and I waddle my way down for breakfast. At 8am, there is not a child in sight as they are all off doing chores. Aruna (social worker/dad) does the polite thing and sits with me as I eat breakfast. It's Saturday. Aruna and I engage in the normal morning chatter – hot weather and activities for the day. The conversation soon shifts. He opens up and confides many personal aspects of his life along with the children at Karuna Sevana. He recalls disturbing anecdotes and is comforted by the fact that I am listening.

The stories of poverty, social inequity, unemployment, violence, exploitation and oppression role off his tongue. I sit and am unsure how to react. We hear such stories on many occasions, empathy sets in and we think for a minute and comfort ourselves through the mechanisms of our privileged and comfortable lifestyles.

As he speaks, suddenly all I can hear are his words, no other sounds resonate, all I see is his face, no other sights visible. Human suffering. These people have adapted to it in a fashion that is unexplainable.

Through these peoples' dispossession and helplessness they impart an unrelenting energy. Energy of survival. Energy that many of us will never have the misfortune of drawing upon each day.

The children here at Karuna Sevana have witnessed atrocities; they have been physically, sexually and mentally abused. They have been abandoned and neglected; they have seen sights that even Hollywood producers dare not screen. They have had to beg and steal, and have had any innocence that is endowed with childhood stolen from them. They have not experienced love and affection from family members, they have not had time to play.

Karuna Sevana is a place of refuge, solidarity and affection. The 40 children who live here come from all different ethnic and religious backgrounds. They together form a family, a family grown out of hardship and a family striving for a future. Thirty boys and ten girls aged between 5 and 20 comprise a group of people who are diligent, funny, witty and wise. They are glad to be here and enjoy living. Their daily chores include tending to pigs, chickens and cows, cooking, cleaning, working in the garden and on the fields. They get up each morning at 5am and go to school at 7:30am. After school they eat, do their chores, and they play. Here they play!

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A right that many children in the third world never realise is the right to play. The right to run around, get dirty and imagine. I believe that this right allows innocence to create a world that many of us are striving for now. A world based on equality, non-violence and genuine justice.

Being here among such life and vitality I am grateful for the opportunity that I have to allow myself to run around, get dirty and imagine. In playing with the children I find myself all the more wiser, not needing words.

Andiambalama, Sri Lanka, 15 February 2003

NEWS IN BRIEF ...

Asian Social Forum (Hyderabad) 2003 photos

ACMICA member Rachel Galea was invited to attend this year's Asian Social Forum, Hyderabad, India, as the Australian Pax Romana representative. She sends some photos from the event.



Rachel speaking at a workshop



Political banter at ASF



ASF closing ceremony

A brand new baby girl!

Stephen and Anita Leung's first child, Clementina, was born on 12 February. The Leung family took advantage of ACMICA's family membership which now makes Clementina our youngest "member"! Congratulations to Stephen and Anita and blessings to their first child.