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**Palestinians have rights, too,
says minister back from region**

By Bob Allen

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (ABP) -- Many Christians support Israel because they believe God long ago promised ancient Palestine to the Jews.

But that doesn't wash in modern day conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, says a Baptist minister just back from a peacemaking delegation to the area.

"Theological claims that the land of ancient Palestine was promised to the Jews by God may be emotionally satisfying but cannot be privileged in a world where gods, like gang leaders, inhabit every other block," said Ken Sehested, executive director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America.

Sehested, who visited the region April 15-29 as part of a Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation, said Palestinians -- both Christian and Muslim -- also have legitimate claims to the land. Unless Jews and Palestinians agree to share the land, he wrote in an upcoming article for The Other Side magazine, it "could become a perpetual killing field" or even trigger a nuclear war.

Sehested said he believes Americans are unduly influenced by media stereotypes suggesting that all Arabs are terrorists. "We never hear that 726,000 Palestinians lost their homes and ancestral lands when the nation of Israel was founded in 1948," he said.

Sehested called the Holocaust, which prompted establishment of the modern Israel after World War II, "an episode unparalleled in the history of human savagery." But the Jewish safe-haven state created in its wake, he said, "was built on the backs" of an indigenous population forced from its home.

Sehested said Israel's current occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip "is patently illegal," and the United Nations has demanded withdrawal several times. The United States, meanwhile, subsidizes Israel to the tune of \$10 million a day, a full 30 percent of the U.S. annual foreign-aid budget.

He acknowledged that Israel has a right to secure borders, but urged the U.S. to "leverage its massive financial aid to Israel as incentive for good-faith bargaining."

Appeals to both sides to simply stop the violence are "disingenuous," Sehested said, because they ignore the existing balance of power. "If both sides were to immediately cease all hostilities, the resulting 'peace' would leave Israel in an overwhelmingly dominant position," he wrote.

Sehested was part of a delegation visiting several cities on the West Bank. While Israeli troops have since withdrawn from most of the areas, fighting was underway at most locations the delegation visited.

The group was among those trying to get food and medicine to Palestinians besieged in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. They accompanied Palestinian children in Hebron to and from school to protect them from harassment by soldiers and stone-throwing children of Jewish settlers. They went with a welding crew sent from Dura to repair a water main that was damaged by an Israeli bulldozer building a roadblock. They also provided a "protective presence" against random shooting by soldiers and Jewish settlers, allowing Palestinian farmers in Jatta to safely harvest a barley crop.

Americans, Sehested said, often have the wrong idea about the Palestinians.

"I am among those raised on 'cowboy and Indian' movies in North America, where the latter were stereotyped as barbarous, untrustworthy and bloodthirsty savages who prey on the weak and innocent," he said. "A similar portrait of Arab peoples has been painted by modern movies and news programs. Until that field of vision changes we will continue to be clueless in reading history and in charting a redemptive future."

It is true that Arab "terror networks" exist, Sehested said, "just as there have been Ku Klux Klan and other terror networks here for over a century." But he said fighting terrorism by military means is "like trying to kill flowering dandelions by hitting them with a golf club," using a borrowed quote.

He also said the violence by Palestinian terrorists "doesn't occur in a vacuum," quoting former Israeli Knesset member Uri Avnery, "The first and worst violence is the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land."

Sehested said he rejects the so-called Oslo Accords proposal for dividing the land between Israel and Palestine. He said any framework for a just peace must rely instead on a recent plan approved by the Arab League.

Sehested, an ordained minister, has led Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America since it formed in 1984. Its headquarters are in Charlotte, N.C.

Christian Peacemaker Teams is an organization originally started in the 1980s by Mennonite, Brethren and Quaker groups. Its mission is to reduce violence by "challenging systems of domination and exploitation," according to its Web site, following the model of Jesus Christ.

The organization sends delegations of four to six people every two months to work with a full-time team stationed in Hebron. Non-violent intervention through documentation and observation "can make a striking difference in explosive situations," according to the Web site.

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-- EDITOR'S NOTE: Ken Sehested's article "House to House, Field to Field: Reflections on a peace mission to the West Bank," is scheduled for the June-July issue of The Other Side magazine. It will also be posted on the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America Web site, www.bpfna.org.

Religious-freedom commission cites allies in America's 'war on terror'

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Some of the United States' best allies in the war on terrorism also have the worst records on abuses of religious liberty, according to a new report.

The U.S. Commission on International Freedom, in its annual report released May 6, cited concern that America might compromise on religious-freedom issues in order to strengthen ties with new allies like Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia and Sudan. All three countries made a listing of worst offenders in the 71-page

report on the state of religious freedom around the world.

"The United States should not compromise its commitment to promoting human rights -- including religious freedom -- during the campaign against terrorism, and should not 'trade-off' that commitment for the cooperation of foreign governments in that campaign," according to the report.

The report warned that the U.S. should ensure any steps taken to improve relations with China, Russia, Pakistan and other nations "do not undermine its human rights message to the governments of these countries."

Specific concerns cited in the report involving nations that are cooperating in America's war on terrorism included:

-- China. Despite signing several human-rights treaties, China's government "has continued to commit severe violations of freedom of religion and belief," the commission said. The report labeled "numerous egregious violations" committed against evangelical and Catholic Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, and other groups, such as the Falun Gong, that the government has labeled "evil cults."

-- Sudan. The commission, in its past two reports, has labeled Sudan "the world's most violent abuser of the right to freedom of religion and belief." Religion is a major factor in Sudan's civil war between the Muslim north and African south, the report continued. Other human rights and humanitarian violations under the Khartoum regime include aerial bombing of civilians and of humanitarian facilities, deliberate denial of humanitarian assistance, abduction of women and children into conditions of slavery, and the forcible displacement of populations from oil-producing areas.

-- Uzbekistan. The conditions for religious freedom in the former Soviet republic "are very poor," according to the report. "In addition to a highly restrictive law on religion that severely limits the ability of minority religions to function, the Uzbek government in recent years has been harshly cracking down on Muslim individuals, groups, and mosques that do not conform to government-prescribed ideas on how the Islamic faith should be practiced and expressed."

-- Saudi Arabia. "The government of Saudi Arabia denies religious freedom and vigorously enforces its prohibition against all forms of public religious expression other than that of those who follow the government's interpretation and presentation of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam," the commission reported. "Numerous Christians and Shi'a Muslims continue to be detained, imprisoned, and deported."

The commission also complained that the State Department and administration hadn't done enough to impose sanctions and incentives on religious-freedom abusers called for in a 1998 law.

The International Religious Freedom Act, which established both the religious-freedom commission and an ambassador-at-large for religious freedom in the State Department, allows the president a range of tools for dealing with nations labeled "countries of particular concern." The commission faulted the administration for inaction against those countries and for not adding Saudi Arabia and Turkmenistan to the list in its own reporting.

The commission also criticized a year-and-a-half delay in filling a vacancy in the religious-freedom ambassador post, causing efforts to promote religious freedom around the world to suffer "significantly."

The commission praised President Bush, however, for emphasizing religious freedom during his February trip to China. While there, Bush gave a nationally televised and uncensored speech touting the importance of individual freedoms, including freedom of belief and worship.

Ten Commandments displays ordered removed

By Robert Marus

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. (ABP) -- A movement to display the Ten Commandments at public buildings across Tennessee has suffered a second major blow in weeks.

U.S. District Judge Allan Edgar ordered the removal of two displays from court buildings in Chattanooga, saying they establish religion in violation of the First Amendment.

That comes on the heels of an advisory sent by the state's attorney general to county commissions claiming posting the Commandments on public buildings is unconstitutional.

The April advisory by Attorney General Paul Summers came amid a campaign calling itself Ten Commandments-Tennessee. Backed by June Griffith, a Republican running for the U.S. Senate, the effort has succeeded in getting about half of the state's 95 counties to approve such displays in the months following last Sept. 11.

"This isn't my idea," Charles Wysong, who is spearheading the campaign, told the Memphis Commercial-Appeal. "God commanded us to put the Ten Commandments up in our homes, our churches, everywhere."

The Hamilton County Commission voted in September to erect displays at the courthouse and a city/county court building. They went up in December.

The American Civil Liberties Union filed suit. At the trial, attorneys for the county said the Ten Commandment displays did not endorse or advance religion.

Judge Edgar disagreed. "We may, if we wish, read and heed the precepts of the Ten Commandments," he said in his opinion. "However, we do not need the aid of the government to do so."

Hamilton County officials will abide by the ruling but may challenge it, according to the Chattanooga Times-Free Press. "We are disappointed with the opinion," county attorney Rheubin Taylor said. "However, the commission put these plaques up as a symbol of our laws and to remind the people of the importance of obeying the laws of the land. Consistent with that, we do intend to obey the law and comply with any final ruling of the court. We are presently reviewing the court's ruling to determine the next appropriate step."

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Senate passes legislation protecting clergy tax break

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Senate passed a bill designed to protect a special tax benefit enjoyed by clergy. The Clergy Housing Allowance Clarification Act now heads to the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue for President Bush to sign, which most observers expect to happen soon.

The bill, originally introduced in the House by U.S. Rep. Jim Ramstad (R-Minn.), was designed to pre-empt a case now before the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, based in San Francisco. In reviewing a dispute over the amount claimed as a housing allowance by a Southern Baptist minister, a court panel dropped a bombshell by announcing that it would take on the larger question of whether existence of the tax loophole violates the separation of church and state.

Many churches, synagogues and other houses of worship would be unable to afford to pay the salary of a full-time cleric if the 81-year-old exemption did not exist. Similar tax exemptions exist for the military and U.S. citizens living abroad.

In the case, California megachurch pastor Rick Warren challenged an IRS ruling that he could not claim \$79,999 of his salary as a tax-exempt housing allowance. The IRS wanted to allow no more than \$59,479. Warren's Saddleback Valley Community Church, located in suburban Los Angeles, is one of the nation's largest congregations and is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

A California tax court ruled in Warren's favor, but the IRS appealed. When it went before the 9th Circuit, a majority on a three-judge panel of the court took the unusual step of using the case to determine the constitutionality of the ministerial housing allowance tax exemption -- something neither side was contesting.

If all goes as planned, after Bush signs the bill the U.S. Justice Department will ask the 9th Circuit to dismiss the Warren case. Refusals by federal circuit courts to such petitions are rare.

Even if the case is dismissed, however, the bill would not prevent future challenges to the constitutionality of the ministerial tax exemption.

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