Amid war, seek path to peace

By Walden Bello, Commentary
Published 4:48 pm, Monday, November 30, 2015

President Barack Obama and French President Francois Hollande met in Washington last week to discuss their plans to combat ISIS, following the deadly attacks in Paris.

Those who planned and took the lives of hundreds of innocent human beings in Paris — and those responsible for recent attacks in Beirut, and the Metrojet explosion over the Sinai — committed hideous deeds that go against the universal values of humanity. These barbaric acts can never be justified by an appeal to religion. They go against the essence of Islam, a religion that affirms life.

As we express our deepest condolences to the families and loved ones of the victims of these atrocities, we must also understand why people are driven to such acts. Their actions stem not from nihilism but from a perverted sense of justice, out of a desire for vengeance against wrongs done to their people.
We should consider that the events in Paris are connected to the military interventions of the French government in Syria, Mali, Chad, Niger and Central African Republic. It is important to place them in the context of the exclusion and economic marginalization that has led to a profound sense of alienation and anger among France's migrant population. ISIS or Daesh, some observers have pointed out in recent days, derives its inhuman strength from these injustices.

In the hours following the Nov. 13 attacks, President Francois Hollande declared that "France is at war." He needs to be reminded of the words shared by another head of state, Franklin D. Roosevelt, at a time of infinitely greater challenge, that in circumstances such as that in which France finds itself: "The worst thing we have to fear is fear itself."

President Hollande's statement, however, is really a case of giving in to fear and panic.

The failure of the "war on terror" declared by the U.S. government since 2001 reminds us that a military strategy is the wrong answer to ISIS. While governments must protect their citizens, the principal response to ISIS and al-Qaeda should be to address the historical and contemporary injustices that have bred them.

The "merciless war" that President Hollande promises is wrongheaded and will merely
accelerate the descent into even more violence. Instead of a declaration of war, the only viable response of humanity today is one that repudiates vengeance and seeks peace with justice.

A grave danger that confronts Europe is a response that scapegoats migrants and migrant communities as responsible for the deeds of ISIS. Those leading this response may advocate curtailment of their rights and the closing of borders to people seeking asylum from the wars in the Middle East in which the Western powers are implicated.

In France, the National Front led by Marine Le Pen, is likely to benefit from the fears and prejudices stoked by the attacks. It is imperative that the peoples of France and Europe stand fast against these racist, anti-Muslim reactions. They must resist calls to "merciless war" that simply conciliate and embolden those who would push for more war at a time when the world needs more peace.

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