**Ramzan for peace**

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Ramzan has begun, giving us all time to reflect, be quiet, pray, and listen to the inner voice of our soul. It is a sacred time, and it is a time to talk and listen to family and friends. It is a time for Iftar dinners and gatherings, and for planning of Eid parties at the end of the month, including travels, as old parents and relatives in the home villages and towns await their loved ones yet another time.
This year, though, more than most years, there are also dark clouds over the holy month. In Pakistan, there is a heated political debate, early general elections are being planned, and ordinary people experience high inflation. But these issues are modest as compared to the uncertainty that Europe faces, indeed the terrible Russian war in Ukraine, affecting the whole world. Let us make Ramzan this year a time to pray for peace in Ukraine and the world.
Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a quarter of the country’s people has become displaced, over four million have become refugees abroad and six million within the country’s borders. We have seen the most terrible videos and photos from the suburbs of the capital Kiev and the city of Mariupol in the east, where close to half a million people lived in a town now levelled to the ground. Only those who are crippled, insane, seriously traumatised, and the like, needing help to leave, stay in rubble. There are many civilian casualties, and injured and killed soldiers. It has been reported that twenty percent of all Russian soldiers have been injured or killed. Many Russian soldiers come from the north of Russia, Siberia and other remote areas, often recruits called for military service, not knowing they would be sent to war.
The Christian month of fast, called Lent, began a week before the Russian invasion began. Lent ends with Easter, on Maundy Thursday on 14 April, followed by Good Friday on 15 April and Easter Sunday on 17 April. During the time of the Soviet Union, which was dissolved in 1989-91, religion was considered a private matter and suppressed. But the Eastern Orthodox Church was always there, although quite underground, and it has again become an important institution. In 2018, the Russian Orthodox Church was created as many regions separated. President Vladimir Putin is often photographed at religious events and he considers the church an important part of the country’s history and identity. The head of the Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, is a former KGB (now FSB) officer, having served together with Putin, who worked for the secret service, even as head of it, before he joined politics. During the current war in Ukraine, the official church in Russia has by some been criticised for having supported the government too closely. In Ukraine, too, most people are Orthodox Christians. Yet, in both countries, there are also other Christian denominations and other religions. The Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky belongs to the Jewish faith. Until WWII, there was a significant Jewish community in Ukraine, but many had to flee and many were killed in the Nazi holocaust, including several of Zelensky’s senior family members.
Religion often plays an important role in wars. In the current Russian-Ukraine war, most people belong to the same branch of the Christian religion. In Ukraine, more people than usual attend church, and churches have been used to seek shelter from war activities. In Russia, churches have been used for propagandistic purposes. Other institutions, obviously the official media, support the state. Cultural institutions, too, such as the famous Bolshoi Theatre and other theatres, hold events to boost morale and support for what in Russia is termed a ‘special operation’, not a war, in Ukraine. Some artists have declined to support the war, but that is not taken lightly by the authorities. Unlike in most other European countries, Lent is practised literally among most Orthodox Christians. Elsewhere in Europe, the months of fasting are spoken about, but rarely observed literally. The Russian invasion of Ukraine began in the midst of this year’s holy month of Lent.
There are many religious groups who oppose war as a matter of principle, holding pacifist views, such as the Christian Quaker Society and of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Buddhist faith is seen as emphasising peaceful coexistence more than many other religions. In all religions, there are faithful who object to war, believing that it is a sin to kill. The Bible’s sixth commandment reads, ‘Thou shall not kill’.
Personally, I find it problematic to use religion to justify war. I believe that we should instead use religion to justify peace and also pacifism, as all life is sacred under God’s law. If we all followed that advice, there would be no wars any more. We would have found other practical ways of solving disputes and conflicts, yes, because we will always have disagreements, as individuals, organisations and states, but they can be solved amicably and peacefully. Armed conflicts and wars are primitive and outdated ways of ‘solving’ conflicts.
We live in a difficult time with regards to peace and war issues. Sadly, the West has for long advocated rearmament, even after the fall of the Soviet Union. Russia and the CIS countries were not seriously invited into a dialogue with the West and the NATO defence alliance, which has today grown to having a budget more than ten times as high as Russia’s military budget. Yet, Russia is the largest nuclear power. Some nuclear disarmament has taken place, but now it seems to have stalled. Military research and weapons production reach unprecedented heights and costs—at the same time as there are growing gaps between rich and poor countries and people, and basic human needs and right are not met. In recent years, Russia has become more autocratic, with poor democracy development; it has also waged wars against neighbouring countries. Yet, few believed that Russia would attack Ukraine militarily, although some intelligence reports showed that as a possibility. If the West had played a more proactive role supporting Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union, and Russia itself had played a more positive role, developments could have been in a democratic direction. Currently, the situation and forecasts are very bleak.
Can this year’s Ramzan be a time of prayer for peace and a search for new ways of international cooperation, indeed for prevention of armed conflicts and wars? We have the competence and means, but do we also have the compassion and will—and the faith? The Pope said a couple of weeks ago that it is ‘madness’ that the West and NATO call for increased military budgets. Perhaps budgets should go up, but be re-allocated to alternative and peaceful defence systems and cooperation. We must turn around while there is still time. Let us pray and work for that now towards the end of Lent, and during the whole month of Ramzan, and the time thereafter. That is God’s will, isn’t it?