

Justice, not revenge, is the way to peace

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Ireland is now at war. For the first time since 1914 Ireland is involved in an international war by allowing US troops to use our airspace and our airports. Mr Ahern has made this decision without consulting Dáil Éireann or the Irish people. We could now share in the responsibility for the deaths of thousands of Afghan men, women and children who will be the main victims of this war. The lives of Afghans are of the same value, even if we do not see their deaths on Sky TV.

Why have we joined this crusade? Why has Mr Ahern destroyed our neutrality without asking the Irish people? He says it is because we are either for or against the terrorists. I have a seven-year-old boy who knows life is more complicated than that. The Irish people know that life is more complicated than that.

To Mr Ahern, Kevin Barry was a hero. To Britain and Kevin Myers he was a terrorist. To the Americans, George Washington was a hero, to Britain he was a terrorist. The list is endless. It is just not acceptable that Mr Ahern should make such a massive and historic decision without any debate in Dáil Éireann or without consulting the people.

He could have been told by the leaders of all the political parties, by the leaders of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Irish Business and Employers Confederation, by the leader-writers of the national newspapers, by the bishops and the leaders of the Irish Farmers' Association, by the talking heads on RTÉ and by the newspaper columnists, that they too support the crusade.

They too want to follow President Bush into the Valley of Death. They all supported Mr Ahern in June during the referendum on the Nice Treaty. But they were all defeated. The Irish people rejected the Treaty of Nice and I believe they do not support this crusade. They at least should be asked.

Civilians are the primary victims of war. Women and children are the primary victims of war. Vincent O'Reilly, chief executive of the Refugee Trust, in a speech to the Peace and Neutrality Alliance national executive said: "I have never in my 25 years of work in conflict situations ever seen a hungry soldier. Women and children represent 90 per cent of the casualties of war. We can be assured of one thing - that Afghanistan will be no different. Already Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world."

The United Nations ranks it 170 out of 174 in its development index. It has one of the highest infant and child mortality rates in the world. There are an estimated 700,000 widows and over 750,000 disabled Afghan men, women and children. It is estimated that 42 per cent of all deaths in Afghanistan are due to diarrheal diseases.

Malnutrition affects up to 35 per cent of all children under five. There are 1.4 million refugees in Iran and 1.2 million in Pakistan.

Noel Dorr, a long-time member of the Irish establishment, said on a TV debate that there are "pools of misery" which give birth to terrorists.

He is wrong. There are oceans of misery.

The gap between the rich and the poor throughout the world has grown massively in the last few decades. Mr Ahern's Government has made the rich richer, which is why they support him.

They have done much better out of the Celtic Tiger era than the poor in Ireland. But the scale of poverty in Afghanistan and in other parts of the world dwarfs that of Ireland.

This crusade that Mr Ahern now supports could turn very easily not just into a war of rich white Christians against the Muslims, but a war of the rich against the poor.

Mr Ahern should immediately withdraw his offer of Irish airspace and airport facilities to the US. Our airports and airspace should be used to bring humanitarian aid, not bombs, to the Afghans. They need food, not weapons. We will bring peace with bread.

The US with only 4 per cent of the world's population controls 36 per cent of military expenditure. If they used their resources for justice instead, the world would be a better place.

If their reaction is to use their resources to bring food to the Afghans then the suspects will be handed over.

No Irish person can be anti-American. It is just not an option. The historic ties between Ireland and the US go back to the very origins of that great country.

I wish to extend heartfelt sympathies to the people of the United States. I unreservedly deplore and condemn these attacks that have no justification and serve no cause.

They are a crime against humanity and those responsible should be brought to justice before the international court established by and responsible to the UN.

It is because I have such respect for the American people that I would ask them to reflect more deeply before they launch the first crusade of this century.

In the old western movies I remember that the marshal protected the suspect from the lynch mob in order to bring him to trial before a court of law. It is only through law that justice will be served.

Posters with "dead or alive" will not bring peace.

In the 1830s, the US secretary of state Daniel Webster, in response to an attack by Britain on the US, said that a war in self defence was justifiable when an attack was "instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means, and no moment of deliberation." This form of wording has stood the test of time - it was used at Nuremberg and it is part of customary law.