

**Catholic bishops join with Pope John Paul II in call for civilised dialogue  
between warring parties in Kosovo**

Gathered for our first meeting in Australia since last May, we have reflected with anguish on the war in the Balkans and the suffering of so many people, especially the citizens of Kosovo.

Like the rest of the world, we have been appalled by the loss of life, the destruction of homes, the breaking up of families, the forced exile of so many thousands of innocent people and the danger that the conflict could spread still further. As in all modern wars, the non-combatants, especially women, children and the elderly, are those who suffer most.

We share with our Holy Father the conviction that the crisis can be solved only by negotiation and a return to civilised dialogue between the warring parties. In Pope John Paul's words, "Answering violence with violence is never the way to get out of a crisis. What must be done is to silence arms and acts of vengeance in order to undertake negotiations" leading to a peace agreement respectful "of different peoples and cultures".

The tireless efforts of the Holy See to help bring about a solution to the problem have so far not produced the desired result. It was especially disappointing that the Pope's call for a ceasefire and a cessation of the NATO bombing during the Western and Eastern celebrations of Easter over the past two weekends fell on deaf ears.

We applaud the humanitarian spirit of many of the people in areas bordering on Kosovo who have received with compassion and kindness the refugees arriving in their midst in such large numbers. We congratulate our own government for its offer to receive several thousand of these people. Should this eventually lead to the arrival of the refugees, we urge the authorities to ensure that they are given the best possible welcome to our shores, seeing to it, for example, that families are kept together and that the new arrivals are treated as honoured guests should be.

We also praise the generosity of Australians who are contributing to appeals for all those suffering deprivation in the Balkans. Our own Church's overseas aid agency, Caritas Australia, has launched an emergency appeal for this purpose.

Finally, we call on the Catholics of Australia to unite in prayer that peace will soon return to the troubled region and that peoples of diverse races and religions will abandon desires for revenge and will live together in the homes of their own choice in harmony and a spirit of forgiveness.