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Witness for Justice # 480

June 14, 2010

Violence Fills the Land

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On May 23rd, 2010 violence erupted in the Tivoli Gardens area of Kingston, Jamaica. This is not the first time violence ensued in Western Kingston, home of many of the island's poorest of the poor. 73 civilians and one soldier were killed in the violence which received little media attention in the United States. Jamaica is one of many countries where violence continues to take the lives of men, women and children. Fighting continues in the Middle East, Somalia, Ethiopia, Thailand, Korea, India and other countries.

The Global Peace Index (GPI) for 2010 utilizes 23 indicators and 32 related indicators in its analysis and ranking of 149 countries. Among the indicators are: perceived criminality in society, number of homicides, jailed population, access to weapons, respect for human rights, military expenditure, armed services personnel and number of heavy weapons. The list of related indicators includes adult literacy, hostility to foreigners and unemployment.

New Zealand tops the list as most peaceful (#1), with Iraq at the bottom (#149). Jamaica ranks 98th, with the United States listed at 85.

Peace points to a lack of conflict – tranquility, harmony and serenity for sure. The obvious places of violence around the world certainly yield no surprise for the ranking of some countries on the GPI. In the U.S. which has no wars within its borders and no places where its military is utilized to subdue its citizenry, how did our country find itself in the 85th spot on the list?

Countries are scored on a scale of 1 to 5 for each indicator, with 1 being the most peaceful. The U.S. scored 2.5 on number of external and internal conflicts fought, exports of major conventional weapons per 100,000 persons, and aggregate number of weighted weapons per 100,000 persons. A score of 3 was given to level of respect for human rights, potential for terrorist attacks and ease of access to small and light

weapons. Scores of 5 were earned for number of jailed population per 100,000 persons and military capability/sophistication.

There are no wars being fought on U.S. soil, but U.S. troops are present and engaged in other countries – including Iraq at 149. The U.S. owns its fair share of “weapons of mass destruction” and it exports weapons around the globe with U.S. weapons finding homes with friend and foe alike.

Internal conflicts may not be as evident as the fighting on the streets in Jamaica, Iraq and Afghanistan, yet the number of incarcerated men, women and children tells the tale of a different type of war that is being fought on the streets of U.S. cities and towns. U.S. export of large weapons is rivaled only by the access young and old have to weapons.

Peace, along with its indicators ought to be of concern in the U.S. and abroad. The International Peace Convocation is scheduled for Kingston, Jamaica on May 17-15, 2011. The convocation will celebrate the Decade to Overcome Violence, a decade that began in 2001. There will be much to celebrate, and much to hope for in the decades to come. Overcoming violence and moving toward peace must be clear goals for our communities around the world.

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,300 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.