

An open letter from Italian organizations for nonviolence

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An open letter from Italian organizations for nonviolence to Barack Obama, next President of the United States.

Dear President Obama,

We would like to congratulate you and all the citizens of the United States on your election as President. We hope that you will govern your country with the goal of making your dream—which is also ours—come true, concretely demonstrating the words pronounced in your victory speech when you said, “The real strength of our nation comes not from the might of our arms or the scale of our wealth, but from the enduring power of our ideals—democracy, liberty, opportunity and unyielding hope.”

General Dwight Eisenhower, 34th President of the USA, based on an understanding of war that came from serving as Commander in Chief of the allied forces in Europe during the Second World War, in his famous “Cross of Iron” speech of April 1953 pronounced the following words, “I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can, only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity “ and also, “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense a theft for those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone; it is spending the sweat of its workers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.” And in his speech of farewell to the nation at the end of his two terms in office, Eisenhower issued a warning to the American people to beware of the military-industrial complex. This complex, he warned, was in no way interested in peace; instead, in its effort to stay alive and grow stronger, it would try to lead the nation into new wars.

In this moment when both your country and ours are in a deep recession, when day after day workers are losing their jobs and do not know how to meet their rents or feed their families, we hope you are convinced, as we are, that the condition of today’s world requires a radical change in foreign policy, one that involves a drastic reduction in military spending in favor of spending for the social good. As the German evangelical pastor Bonhoeffer (who was executed for his steadfast opposition to Nazism) said, “weapons kill even if they are not used.” The money employed in building arms, besides killing human beings and destroying essential goods, is subtracted from social, economic and civil growth, increasing the gap between rich and poor and in the end producing far less employment than would be possible if it were employed for social needs. Even the important program you have announced, aimed at reconverting the US economy from its current dependence on environmentally-disastrous fossil fuels to solar energy, will be virtually impossible to carry out if the current extravagant level of military spending is not curtailed.

Nor does the high military spending of both our nations really serve to fight terrorism, which is its declared purpose; on the contrary, it actually encourages its growth. Your country, which has only 5% of the world’s population, accounts for almost half of total global spending on weapons and warfare. And the wealthy G8 nations, including our own, together

with the two Asian countries that are currently following the western model of development (India and China), account for over 80% of global spending in these sectors while numbering less than half the world's population. This imbalance in military spending in international relations has the nefarious consequence that countries that spend less on armies and weapons and yet are not willing to accept domination by what has been called the "new empire," rather than discovering the wisdom of non-violent struggle, are encouraged to invent new, cheap but effective weapons that can strike the enemy's heart. This is especially true in cases of conflicts that have lasted for years, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These new arms include the so-called kamikazes, fanatics who sacrifice themselves in order to kill as many 'enemies' as possible; they include placing bombs and other deathly instruments on trains or at other nodal points of western society, as happened not only in the US but also in Spain and in England, and as we fear might happen in other nations, including Italy. This has brought the level of insecurity of single citizens in the wealthy world to a level never before reached, despite the fact that they have the greater part of the world's most powerful weapons for their defense. The rich world responds by making more and more powerful weapons, thereby increasing the imbalance in weapon power between themselves and the others who, in turn, respond by intensifying their terrorist activity. This insane spiral must be interrupted.

In particular, the presence of your soldiers and military bases on Italian soil is less and less welcome. What is more, the existence on our territory of American (Aviano) and Italian (Ghedi) bases housing nuclear warheads, weapons used for attack and not for defense, is in stark contrast with Article 11 of the Italian Constitution, which states "Italy repudiates war as an instrument offensive to the liberty of other peoples and as a means of resolving international controversies." Our movements have gathered thousands of signatures of Italian citizens for two proposals for popular-initiative laws, which have been presented to the Italian Parliament: one calls for the elimination of nuclear arms from our national territory and the second for the closing of these and other military bases.

There is another issue: the decision of the Bush administration, known for its aggressive military policy (which even goes so far as to theorize a "state of permanent war") to double the American base at Vicenza has led to continuous demonstrations of protest on the part of the city's population, in overwhelming majority against this new base. These protests have been recognized as legitimate by the Administrative Tribunal of the Region in which Vicenza is found. The present Italian government, which has repeatedly supported the Bush administration's aggressive policies, has ignored this sentence and the preference expressed by the city's citizens, giving the go-ahead to start work on the second base.

We are friends of the American people, and we rejoice in the fact that soon you will represent this people. For this reason we hope you will decide on a radical change in the foreign politics of your country, guiding it towards peace and justice. In a conference we organized on the prevention of armed conflicts and the creation of corps trained specially for this purpose (Civil Peace Corps), it was revealed that we are currently spending for the prevention of armed conflicts 1 Euro as compared to the 10,000 Euros we spend to wage wars. If this imbalance continues the future of the world will surely be permanent war. We must reverse this course.

Here is a proposal we have made to solve the controversy regarding Vicenza within the spirit of a new collaboration for peace: To create a structure where the United States, Canada and Europe can work together as equals over a long period towards the prevention and the civil solution of conflicts that jeopardize the lives of millions of people. This would be set in the framework of the UN Peace Agenda's recognition of the importance of Civil Peace Keeping. Europe has a great deal to offer, thanks also to nations that are non-aligned and not members of NATO, such as Sweden, Finland and Austria: the concept of "civil power" on which its action in the international system is based; its experiences of popular diplomacy and

diplomacy at various other levels; the new policies aimed at preventing armed conflict in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. But the United States also possesses an enormous historic patrimony as well as scientific competence regarding conflict prevention and civil intervention: from the historic agreement of Camp David to the Martin Luther King Center and Carter's Document/Action Center, both in Atlanta, to USIP (United States Institute of Peace), to individual projects of research and intervention for peaceful solutions, such as "Preventing Deadly Conflict" in New York.

Starting from all this, the Vicenza movement would welcome a different sort of American and international presence: instead of thousands of parachuters ready to intervene militarily in the four corners of the world, a Center for the prevention of and civil intervention in conflicts, where European nations, the United States and Canada (a nation committed to foreign policy based on the concept of "human security"), along with all other nations interesting in developing the UN's concept of Civil Peace Keeping, can discuss and prepare civil means of crises solution and prevention of violent escalation, and can train civil peace corps for unarmed interventions. A civil structure that would not violate the natural and urban environment. Vicenza would thus become a place for dialogue and for the production of the politics of peace, a place to work in a new way towards the security of human society.

We know that, like us, you nourish deep respect and admiration for Mahatma Gandhi and for Dr. Martin Luther King. In their memory, we hope that you will reflect on this proposal and that that we can join hands in making it a concrete reality.

With deepest respect and very best wishes,

L'Associazione Onlus "Berretti Bianchi", La Fucina per la Nonviolenza (Florentine section of the Movimento Nonviolento), La Comunità per lo Sviluppo Umano ed il Movimento Umanista di Firenze, l'Associazione Locale Obiezione e Nonviolenza-gruppo azione nonviolenta Forlì-Cesena (alon-gan fc), l'IPRI-Rete Corpi Civili di Pace, il Movimento Nonviolento, la Tavola della Pace del Friuli Venezia Giulia, il Centro Gandhi Edizioni ed i Quaderni Satyagraha di Pisa, il Centro Studi Sereno Regis di Torino, Agenzia per la pace Valtellina, Valchiavenna e Alto Lario, Ecoistituto del Piemonte, Commissione Comunale per la Pace del Comune di Bagno a Ripoli (Fi.), U.S. Citizens Against War in Florence, Italy , Associazione Peacelink, Free Lance International Press Roma, Lega per il Disarmo Unilaterale, Rete "Europe for Peace", Movimento Internazionale per la Riconciliazione, Tavolo di consultazione No Dal Molin: Noi siamo Vicenza , costituito dalle seguenti associazioni : (AltraVicenza, ASOC, APRIRSI, Associazione VicenzaCapoluogo, Beati i Costruttori di Pace, CGIL, Comitato Immigrati S. Pio X, Comitato Più Democrazia e Partecipazione, Coordinamento Comitati Cittadini, Comitato per l'Aeroporto Civile, Coordinamento Cristiani per la Pace, Deliberamente, Donne in rete per la pace, Ecoistituto del Veneto, Emergency, Equistiamo, Famiglie per la Pace, Federazione Verdi Vicenza, Festambiente, Fronte della Cultura, Granello di Senape, Gruppo Presenza a Longare, Laboratorio della Convivenza Civica, Legambiente Movimento dei Consumatori, Movimento Gocce di Giustizia, MIR :Movimento Internazionale della Riconciliazione, Movimento Nonviolento, Opera Nomadi Vicenza, Operatori Sanitari per la Pace, Pax Christi, Preti No Dal Molin, Progetto Sulla Soglia - Coop. Soc. Tangram, Rete Famiglie Aperte, Coop. Soc. Insieme-, Rete Lilliput, Sinistra Democratica, Tra Due Mondi, UNICOMONDO), Mondo senza guerra, Casa per la Nonviolenza e la rivista "Il grido dei poveri" di San Ferdinando di Puglia (Foggia), Mensile "Azione Nonviolenta".