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Ministry in Middle East
still not back to normal

By Mike Creswell

N-FMB

NICOSIA, Cyprus (BP)--Southern Baptist workers who evacuated from Israel ahead of the Gulf war were expected to return there in early March.

But workers assigned to Jordan and Gaza were waiting for further clarification of conditions before returning. Anti-American feelings continue to run high in much of the Middle East, especially in Jordan and among Palestinians in Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza.

"So far our general feeling is that conditions aren't as bad as we had anticipated," said Dale Thorne, who directs Southern Baptist work in the Middle East and North Africa. But he cautioned that it was still too early to tell what effect the war will have on long-term conditions in the region.

Earlier Thorne and leaders of several Christian agencies had expressed concern that the bitter feelings that erupted during the war could harm Christian ministry among Muslims for years, both in the Middle East and other parts of the world.

Although the war divided Arabs as well as Muslims and fanned anti-Western feelings to a fever pitch, the "nightmare scenarios" some had pictured never materialized, Thorne said.

"It could have been much worse," he said.

One scenario many feared was the entry of Israel into the war, which many observers said could have led some members of the Arab coalition against Iraq to change sides, causing a much wider conflict.

Many Palestinians, including Christians among the group, backed Saddam Hussein during the war, taking pride that a champion had arisen to stand up to the West. The Iraqi leader tried to make the Palestinian question part of an agreement on withdrawing his forces from Kuwait, but no mention of Palestinians was included in the final war settlement.

"Palestinians want to hold on to the thought that Saddam really won, but the reality is that it's not the case," said one observer in the region. "There's no indication how that will affect them."

Southern Baptist workers assigned to Jordan and Gaza are remaining in either Israel or Egypt until conditions appear safe for their return, Thorne said. The wait-and-see attitude on Jordan also is being followed by several other Christian agencies for now, he added. Few other groups have personnel assigned to Gaza.

"Baptist leaders in Jordan are praying for the day when Southern Baptist personnel can return," Thorne said.

Life is returning to normal in Israel, where emergency regulations have been lifted, said Tom Hocutt, administrator for Southern Baptists there. "We have stored our gas masks in our houses and been able to unseal our rooms. There are no restrictions on meeting at night as we had earlier," he said.

A March 4 meeting of Southern Baptist personnel who remained in the country during the war became a "celebration time for us," Hocutt said. "It's nice to be out from under the tension and pressure."

More than three dozen Iraqi-fired Scud missiles sent Israelis rushing into sealed rooms wearing gas masks, fearing poisonous gas. Although poison gas was never launched, the missiles killed two people, injured scores of others and did extensive property damage.

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Fragments of one Scud missile or the U.S. Patriot missile that intercepted it fell onto the roof of Southern Baptist workers Ray and Suzanne Altman, who live near Tel Aviv. But the fragments were small and did no damage.

One of the last missiles that landed in the Tel Aviv area struck less than three miles from a school dormitory for children of Southern Baptist workers.

Elsewhere in the region, Southern Baptist workers assigned to medical work at a hospital in Yemen remained safe during recent weeks, despite large demonstrations mostly aimed at foreign embassies in Sanaa, the capital city. The Yemeni government sent troops to protect the hospital during the Gulf crisis, assuring the Americans they were wanted and needed. Most Southern Baptist workers assigned to Morocco, the scene of riots, have returned there.

Meanwhile, Southern Baptist planners are exploring ways to meet human needs in Kuwait and expand ministry throughout the Middle East.

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EDITORS' NOTE: Frank Wm. White, a news writer in the Sunday School Board's office of communications, is a public affairs officer in the Tennessee Army National Guard serving in Operation Desert Storm. He was in Kuwait City three days after the cease-fire and provided this story based on his observations.

Aftermath of war provides
new ministry opportunities

By Frank Wm. White

F-SSB

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KUWAIT CITY, Kuwait (BP)--In the days following the coalition forces' rout of Saddam Hussein's armies from Kuwait, the Kuwaiti capital is ecstatic with celebration of freedom and, at the same time, marred with the scars of occupation and violence.

Three days after the cease-fire, Kuwaiti citizens were festively driving through the streets, honking car horns and waving their nation's black, green, red and white flag which had been banished from view since the Aug. 2 invasion.

Flags flew from street corners and houses while oversized versions were draped from building rooftops.

Kuwaiti soldiers operated numerous checkpoints throughout the city, checking occupants of each vehicle for proper identification -- a reminder that the horrors of the occupation were not long since past.

Once one of the Middle East's most beautiful cities, Kuwait's capital will not soon recover from the damages of the occupation and the battle to regain freedom.

Modern, glass structures and stately, classic Greek-style buildings alike show signs of wanton destruction and the barrage of gunfire.

Iraqi tanks, armored vehicles, artillery pieces and other mangled vehicles still littered the city's streets where bomb craters are stark reminders of the violence. An occasional fly-covered, bloated body could still be seen dangling from some vehicles or crushed under other overturned, mangled machines of war.

Kuwaiti citizens stopped to look at each collection of disabled vehicles in an almost carnival atmosphere.

"We want to see the dead Iraqis. That's what we're interested in," one woman confided as she and her family stopped to view a particularly gruesome scene.

American soldiers, evident throughout the city, received the Kuwaitis' highest praises. Soldiers driving through the streets were made to feel like beloved liberators. Passengers of every passing car waved at the Americans, many smiling and honking their horns while some waved American flags.

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One young, well-dressed Kuwaiti in a customized and well-cared-for Volkswagen Bug pulled close alongside a U.S. Army vehicle and proudly sported American eagle and American flag metal license plates displayed in the car's window.

Another pair of young Kuwaitis with a home video camera stopped a U.S. Army captain using their best imitation of television news interviewing techniques to ask impressions of the coalition forces' ground campaign.

Despite the euphoria and celebration, the ravages of the occupation could be seen most in the city's children. In the outskirts of the city, children cheered and waved to American soldiers. If the soldiers stopped, the children swarmed the vehicle.

It first seemed the children might want only to shake hands and say hello. However, it soon became clear that their greatest interest was food.

Remaining contents of opened MREs -- meals, ready to eat, the U.S. soldiers' staple food supply -- that had been the soldier's on-the-road snack following a pre-dawn start without breakfast, were quickly grabbed from dashboard and console.

Other MRE packages offered to the crowd were quickly grabbed and carried away as were bottles of water. Soon, it seemed a hundred or more youths and children had swarmed the vehicle, and many were climbing in the back as well as in with the passengers.

The vehicle's four armed occupants would soon be no match for the horde. The only safe alternative to losing control of the situation seemed to be to drive away while it was still possible. The exit was made with regret that little had been done to help the children.

Because of the relative wealth of Kuwait, begging for food does not seem to have previously been a common practice for the city's children.

Now is a time when Southern Baptists and other Americans may have their greatest impact in helping Kuwaitis rebuild their country.

Immediate food and disaster relief is an obvious need. Other more long-term ministries could develop from that effort.

Meanwhile, in north central Saudi Arabia, the town of Hafar al Batin, a commercial center of sorts for the area, on the day following the cease-fire was returning to what might appear to be its normal pre-invasion routine.

Lights returned to the city streets and some storefronts which had been covered with metal bars for many months were beginning to reopen.

The town also had a festive atmosphere with nightly impromptu parades of local citizens in cars and pick-up trucks waving Kuwaiti and Saudi flags through the streets honking car horns.

In the endless desert surrounding Hafar al Batin, less than 36 hours after the cease-fire began, Bedouins could be seen returning to the desert with their herds of sheep and camels.

All but a few staunch, territorial wanderers had taken their herds elsewhere and had been replaced in the desert by groupings of coalition forces' tanks and other vehicles that seemed to rival the sheep and camels in sheer numbers.

The war machines certainly made the desert an unpleasant place for the free-spirited herdsmen while combat leaders encouraged them to take their herds elsewhere lest they be in the way of combat maneuvers or become an easy cover for Iraqi infiltrators.

But, after the warriors moved north, the Bedouins seemed intent on wasting no time getting their herds to the tender green grass that had followed the frequent and unusually heavy rains of the past two months.

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In time, the Bedouins will forget about the guests who temporarily replaced them, recalling them only when they stumble on an abandoned bunker or piles of sandbags.

As host to the coalition forces, Saudi Arabia was spared the violent scars of war. The visit from Westerners, nonetheless, will have a lasting impact on the previously closed, Islamic society.

Saudi Arabians will not soon forget the thousands of Americans and other Westerners who briefly inhabited their land. That contact, brought about by dire necessity of an impending emergency, could open the door for future contact.

As Southern Baptists return to Kuwait with a new mission, they may also find opportunities elsewhere in the region that previously could not have been imagined.

Now, the challenge for Southern Baptists may be to see the greater world need and unite as a cooperative force to respond to opportunities in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world.

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Court interpretation continues
to thwart free exercise claims

By Larry Chesser

N-CG
(BGC)

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WASHINGTON (BP)--Churches battling two municipal landmark ordinances suffered setbacks in March 4 actions by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The court's actions further demonstrated the impact of a 1990 ruling that watered down the high court's longstanding test protecting free exercise of religion.

Last year, the high court virtually abandoned its strict standard that required governmental agencies to demonstrate a compelling state interest before taking steps to curb religious freedom. In that case, Oregon v. Smith, the justices held that the state of Oregon need demonstrate only a reasonable interest, not a compelling interest, to deny members of the Native American Church the right to ingest peyote in religious ceremonies.

In one of its March 4 actions, the Supreme Court vacated a Washington Supreme Court ruling that the application of a Seattle landmarks preservation ordinance to churches violated the First Amendment's free exercise clause and the Washington state constitution. The case was sent back to Washington for reconsideration in light of the Smith case's "reasonableness" test.

Washington's Supreme Court had ruled prior to the Smith decision that Seattle's landmark preservation ordinance did not constitute a compelling state interest and that the application of the ordinance to First Covenant Church over the church's objection violated its free exercise rights.

In another municipal landmark ordinance case, the high court declined to hear the appeal of a lower-court ruling against a New York City congregation that challenged that city's landmark statute.

The court let stand a ruling by the U.S. 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals that the landmark ordinance did not violate the free exercise rights unless the church is completely unable to carry out its religious mission in its existing facilities. The 2nd Circuit's ruling was appealed to the Supreme Court by St. Bartholomew's Church, which was seeking to replace an existing structure that had been designated for historic preservation.

"Washington was the first state to recognize that restrictions on a church's architecture are restrictions on religious freedom," said Baptist Joint Committee General Counsel Oliver S. Thomas. "That the Supreme Court would vacate this decision indicates how deeply the justices are committed to Smith's watered-down view of the free exercise clause. It underscores the urgent need for the Religious Freedom Restoration Act."

Thomas was referring to a legislative proposal that would restore the stricter compelling interest test. The measure first introduced late in the 101st Congress and expected soon to be reintroduced.

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"Although unfortunate, neither decision was much of a surprise after Smith," said Baptist Joint Committee Associate General Counsel J. Brent Walker. "For all intents and purposes, the St. Bartholomew's litigation is over. But we hope the Washington Supreme Court will stick by its first decision and base its ruling squarely on state constitutional grounds, as the Supreme Courts of Massachusetts and Minnesota have done in free exercise cases.

"The Supreme Court action again points up the dire need to pass the Religious Freedom Restoration Act as soon as possible."

The two landmarking cases are Seattle, Wash. v. First Covenant Church of Seattle and St. Bartholomew's v. New York City.

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Educators' meeting
spawns Baptist network

By Pat Cole

N.C. (S.B.T.S.)

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--A meeting of about 80 Southern Baptist Christian educators has spawned a network intent on exploring innovative methods of Christian education.

The Christian Education Network was the name chosen for the group by a 13-member steering committee selected by workshop participants March 1-2 at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

The workshop "grew out of a need to explore some issues in Christian education and the need to be more pro-active regarding Christian education," said Joey Clifton, associate minister in education at Second Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn.

The network will provide forums for Christian educators to share ideas and will encourage professional development among Christian educators, said Clifton, a steering committee member. It will also seek ways to keep educational ministers aware of literature options, he said.

Clifton, along with Tim Brock, minister of education at Fredericksburg (Va.) Baptist Church; Karen Massey, minister of education at Northside Drive Baptist Church in Atlanta; and Dennis Foust, associate pastor at First Baptist Church in Chattanooga, Tenn., organized the workshop hosted by Southern Seminary's School of Christian Education.

Participants expressed a need for educational ministers to play a greater role in developing curricula that address the needs of the particular congregation they serve, said Clifton. Many local church educators, he said, are dissatisfied with the "programmatic approach" to Christian education prescribed by the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board and other publishing houses.

"For many years, we have been told what to do," he said. "We have come to realize each church is different."

Local churches taking a greater role in their own curriculum design is a "clear example of Baptist ecclesiology at work," said William B. Rogers, dean of Southern's School of Christian Education. Such an approach recognizes the diversity of needs that exist in every Baptist congregation, he said.

Concern over the Southern Baptist Convention controversy and its impact on denominational educational literature was a factor in convening the workshop, acknowledged Clifton. The workshop, however, was not a response to the recent forced retirement of Sunday School Board President Lloyd Elder, he said, noting invitations were mailed before Elder's retirement was announced. The move toward localizing curriculum development is a positive step irrespective of the denominational controversy, he stressed:

"We are not saying we want to do away with the Sunday School Board, but it doesn't meet the needs of every church."

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The newly-formed network is an attempt to "deal creatively with frustration," said R. Michael Harton, director of the Baptist General Association of Virginia's Sunday school development division. The frustration, he said, stems "not so much from an institution or even a denominational crisis but from the result of trying to perpetuate a cool-fired machine in a nuclear age."

Nevertheless, Christian educators in many cases face more anxiety over the denominational crisis than pastors, Rogers noted: "Educational ministers in local churches do not have the independence of sermon preparation. They are necessarily tied to the denominational literature and program, so therefore they feel the pressure of the denominational turbulence on a daily basis."

The Christian educators at the workshop divided into five small groups with each participant presenting a paper on some task of Christian education. Resource people who lent expertise to the groups included Findley Edge, emeritus professor of Christian education at Southern Seminary; Temp Sparkman, professor of religious education at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo.;

Bruce Powers, professor of Christian education at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.; Kathryn Chapman, professor of childhood education at Southern Seminary; and Bob Fulbright, minister of education at Kirkwood Baptist Church in St. Louis. Southern Seminary church history professor Bill J. Leonard addressed the workshop on issues related to Baptist history and doctrine.

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Be willing to be used
for God's glory: Clower

By Steve Barber

F-CO
(B HODD)

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GATLINBURG, Tenn. (BP)--"God hasn't ever made a mistake, and he's never going to make one with you."

Christian entertainer Jerry Clower drove that point home again and again to more than 500 High School Baptist Young Men at their annual rally and training event March 1-3 in Gatlinburg, Tenn.

Clower interwove his message that "Christianity works" with his well-known tales of growing to manhood with sidekick "Marselle Ledbetter," moving his audience of youth from gales of laughter to rapt attention.

"I love you all because you're not a bunch of pessimists," Clower continued. "Negativism can kill us graveyard dead. It can ruin nations, it can lose wars, it can destroy marriages, it can bust up churches."

Clower told the youth, who participate in the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission's missions education program for young men in grades 10 through 12, to be willing to be used by God for his glory.

"Every day when I get up, the first thing I do is pray. I say, 'Lord, I'm on your side. You've never made a mistake. So whatever happens today, I'm just going to praise your name and keep on going.' It's hard to give thanks for all things, but we'll understand it better by and by. Whatever is out there, he will use it, and use you in it."

Clower's appearance was a highlight of a full weekend of learning more about being used in God's service, and training to serve more effectively.

Participants selected from more than 30 conferences on topics ranging from personal witnessing, Bible study, and missions projects to Christian dating, clowning, and mime ministry.

Mime and dramatist Doug Berky of Nashville taught two conferences and performed for assemblies throughout the weekend with a message much like Clower's.

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"God calls us to be light in a dark world," Berky said. "So continue to pray and listen to the voice of Scripture, the God who calls you. God wants you to be yourself, to be what he made. And he wants you to use your gifts and glorify him in all that you do."

Berky's representations in mime included his impressions of self-absorbed young Americans contrasted with hunger in the Third World, and his view of those he defined as "Christ followers" throughout history, including Corrie Ten Boom, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mother Teresa.

"I can get depressed about the condition of this world until I look at people like these, who responded to God's call," Berky said. "The Bible is full of incredible stories about the choices God makes. He calls ordinary people to do extraordinary things, like young David, who was your age when he took on Goliath."

Brotherhood Commission President James H. Smith, who led the young men in a study in Philippians, was honored for his role in the creation of the High School Baptist Young Men's program four years ago and for his ongoing support.

Smith will retire later this year.

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Steve Barber is communications coordinator for church and denominational relations of the Brotherhood Commission.