



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on Iraq **September 2012**

Out of love for the dialogue and peace which protect creation, I exhort the government leaders and the citizens of Iraq to overcome their divisions and the temptation to violence and intolerance, in order to build together the future of their country. The Christian communities also wish to make their own contribution, but if this is to happen, they need to be assured respect, security and freedom.

--Pope Benedict XVI, January 11, 2010

BACKGROUND

Almost ten years after the start of the Iraq War in March 2003, the situation in Iraq remains fragile with a surge in violence and the Iraqi government paralyzed by what appears to be increasingly sectarian conflict. The U.S. Administration had hoped that Iraqi leaders would “move toward political reconciliation and away from sectarianism” when the American military formally ended its mission in Iraq in December 2011. Instead Iraqis continue to face looming questions about security and stability, amidst a volatile political environment. This instability has a major impact on Iraqi Christians and other minorities.

After inconclusive parliamentary elections in March 2010, an uneasy alliance between Shia, Kurdish and Sunni parties formed a “national unity government” in December 2010. But tensions between the Sunni-backed Iraqiya party and Shiites escalated over who would hold key defense and interior positions. In December 2011, the Iraqiya party began boycotting Parliament to protest Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki’s centralization of power. Al-Maliki, a Shiite, moved to arrest Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, the highest ranking Sunni who fled to Kurdistan. Anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, another Shiite, challenged al-Maliki and called for dissolution of Parliament. That move was squashed, but rumors of a possible no-confidence vote continued in May and June 2012. In August 2012, an Iraqi cabinet level minister, a Sunni, resigned citing al-Maliki’s interference in his ministry. Tensions between Shiites and Kurds over control of oil resources in Kurdistan, a semi-autonomous area that was negotiating its own contracts with foreign oil companies, point to a government hampered by conflict and divisions.

Terrorists and insurgents, especially al-Qaeda in Iraq, are taking advantage of the instability to target both security forces and civilians in an effort to undermine the already fragile government. The growing conflict in neighboring Syria where regional powers vie for influence adds to the volatility. All this diverts attention from the basic need to enhance security, accelerate economic and social reconstruction, train civil servants, and provide poverty-focused assistance for the most vulnerable Iraqis.

In October 2011 Bishop Gerald Kicanas and Bishop George Murry, SJ returned from a pastoral visit to Iraq with moving and sobering accounts about the terrible conditions facing Christians and religious minorities. At first Iraqi Christians viewed the attacks as similar to those on all Iraqis; but a pattern of deliberate violence against Christians and other vulnerable minorities by extremist groups has emerged. Attacks, like the one that killed scores in the Syrian Catholic cathedral in Baghdad in October 2010, have caused many in the Iraqi Christian community to flee, putting increasing pressure on the remaining Christian population.

Out of about 27 million Iraqis, more than 2 million are internally displaced from their homes, while another 2 million are refugees who fled into neighboring countries. A log-jam of refugee immigration work and increased security checks prevent displaced Iraqis from changing their refugee status and delays processing. Of the 25,000 U.S. visas promised to Iraqis who assisted Americans in 2008, only 3,800 have

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been granted. Iraqi refugees caught in Syria have no place to go since many cannot return to Iraq.

THE BISHOPS' POSITION PRIOR TO THE WAR

USCCB issued four major letters/statements prior to the war, questioning the moral legitimacy of any preemptive, unilateral use of military force to overthrow the government of Iraq as such actions would create deeply troubling moral and legal precedents. The Conference expressed “grave moral concerns about military intervention in Iraq and the unpredictable and uncontrollable negative consequences of invasion and occupation.” With the Holy See, the Conference maintained that resorting to war would not meet the strict conditions in Catholic teaching for the just use of military force.

USCCB POSITION IN THE WAKE OF WAR

USCCB consistently highlighted the need for a “responsible transition to end the war in Iraq,” with a special emphasis on the dire situation of Christians and other minorities. This concern is reflected in USCCB’s major statements on Iraq. The elements of a responsible transition are: minimizing further loss of human life, addressing the humanitarian crisis in Iraq and the refugee crisis in the region, promoting political reconciliation in Iraq, and engaging international support for stabilizing Iraq, including engagement with Syria and Iran. With the departure of U.S. forces from Iraq and the conflict in Syria, the increased violence, political turmoil, and sectarian fragmentation are very troubling obstacles to the goal of “responsible transition.”

In October 2010, following the announcement of the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq, the Chairs of USCCB’s Committees on International Justice and Peace and on Migration sent a letter to Secretary Clinton. They welcomed the end of U.S.-led combat operations, but emphasized the continuing need to support Iraq in ways that provide security and human rights for all citizens, especially Christians and other minorities, and develop long-term solutions for Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons. They noted the “continuing moral obligations that came with military intervention” and the “moral responsibility to help protect the lives and dignity of the Iraqi people and to assist them as they seek to recover from war and rebuild their nation.”

In response to the horrific October 31, 2010 attack on the Syrian Catholic cathedral in Baghdad, Cardinal Francis George, then USCCB President, issued a public statement decrying the violence and wrote a letter, later affirmed by the full body of bishops, to President Obama calling on our nation to take “additional steps now to help Iraq protect its citizens, especially Christians and others who are victims of organized attacks.” In November 2010, USCCB wrote a second letter to Secretary Clinton noting that the attack on the Catholic cathedral in Baghdad was a “critical reminder of the need for a ‘responsible transition’ in Iraq that protects all citizens, especially Christians and vulnerable minorities.”

In numerous letters, meetings, and statements, USCCB has focused particular attention on the terrible situation of refugees, a disproportionate number of whom are Christians. In March 2012, USCCB issued a statement of concern for peace in the Middle East, focusing on suffering Christians. In June 2012, Iraqi Bishop Shlemon Warduni addressed the full body of bishops on the difficulties that the Church and Christians face in Iraq. Iraq was chosen as one of three case studies for a September 2012 conference highlighting international religious freedom. USCCB Migration and Refugee Services and Catholic Relief Services sponsored a refugee fact-finding trip to the region in July 2007. Another trip is planned for fall 2012.

ACTION REQUESTED

The U.S. bishops raised grave moral questions prior to the war in Iraq; now USCCB urges our nation to continue working with the Iraqi government on the elements of “a responsible transition” following U.S. withdrawal: reducing further loss of life, addressing the humanitarian crisis in Iraq and the refugee crisis in the region, helping to rebuild the war-torn country, promoting political reconciliation in Iraq, protecting human rights and religious freedom, and engaging international support in stabilizing Iraq. In particular, the USCCB urges strong action to protect Christians and other minorities. Although the combat phase of U.S. engagement in Iraq has ended, the moral obligation of our nation toward the Iraqi people has not.

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