



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

### **Background on Iraq** **February 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 nine years after the start of the Iraq War in March 2003, the situation in Iraq remains difficult. In February 2009 the Obama Administration offered an 18-month plan for the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops, but promised to “responsibly end the war in Iraq” by leaving some non-combat forces to advise and assist Iraqi forces, giving Iraqi leaders time to “move toward political reconciliation and away from sectarianism.” President Obama announced the end of the U.S. combat mission in Iraq on August 31, 2010. On December 15, 2011, the American military formally ended its mission in Iraq, leaving Iraqis to face looming questions about security and stability, amidst a volatile political environment.

Iraq held parliamentary elections in March 2010. Unfortunately, it took many months to establish a government, which still remains divided and fragile. Without U.S. military forces to aid in general security, the threat of a more violence and other human rights violations, including violations of religious freedom and persecution of minorities, remains.

Terrorists and insurgents continue to target both security forces and civilians in an effort to destabilize the already fragile government. In the wake of U.S. withdrawal, important steps to enhance security must be taken. Accelerating economic and social reconstruction, training civil servants, and providing poverty-focused assistance for the most vulnerable Iraqis must continue.

In October 2011 Bishops Gerald Kicanas and George Murry SJ made a pastoral visit to Iraq to see firsthand the conditions that Christians and religious minorities face in and around Baghdad. Their accounts were moving and sobering. For Iraqi Christians, the overall situation is terrible. At first Iraqi Christians viewed the attacks on Christians as attacks on all Iraqis; however, a pattern of deliberate violence against Christians and other vulnerable minorities by extremist groups has clearly emerged. This trend is powerfully symbolized by the attack that killed scores of Christians during Mass in the Syrian Catholic cathedral in Baghdad in October 2010. Violence against Christians has caused significant portions of 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 have fled into neighboring Syria and Jordan. Currently, a log-jam of refugee immigration work prevents displaced Iraqis from changing their refugee status. Increased security checks in U.S. immigration practices continue to hamper this process. In fact, of the 25,000 U.S. visas promised to Iraqis who assisted the American war effort in 2008, only 3,800 have been granted.

## **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.

## **CONTINUING USCCB POSITION**

For over six years, USCCB has consistently highlighted the need for a “responsible transition to end the war in Iraq.” Of special concern to USCCB is the dire situation of Christians and other minorities in Iraq. 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. Though the U.S. military action in Iraq has come to an end, it remains unclear if “responsible transition” can actually be achieved. With the departure of U.S. forces from Iraq, the possibility of increased violence, political turmoil, sectarian fragmentation, and even the emergence of a police state are very troubling prospects.

On October 15, 2010 following the announcement of the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq, Bishop Howard Hubbard, Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, and Bishop John Wester, Chairman of the Migration Committee, 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 achieving a “responsible transition” that provides security and human rights for all citizens, especially Christians and other minorities, and develops 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, the USCCB President, issued a public statement decrying the violence and wrote a letter 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.” This letter was affirmed by the full body of bishops at their November 2010 Plenary Assembly.

On November 4, 2010 Bishop Hubbard and Bishop Wester wrote a second letter to Secretary of State 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. USCCB Migration and Refugee Services and Catholic Relief Services sponsored a refugee fact-finding trip to the region in July 2007. In the past year the Conference has repeatedly highlighted the vulnerable situation of Iraqi Christians in particular.

## **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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