

September 6, 2007: USCIRF to Secretary Rice: U.S. Must Address Threats to Religious Minorities in Iraq

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WASHINGTON-The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent, bipartisan federal agency, has sent a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice urging the U.S. government to address the severe threats to Iraq's smallest religious minorities." While all Iraqis are threatened by violence, the non-Muslim minorities face particularized forms of harassment and abuse; what is more, these groups appear to suffer a degree of violent attacks and other human rights abuses disproportionate to their numbers," says the letter, signed on behalf of the Commission by Chairman Michael Cromartie. The Commission urges the U.S. government to take more effective action to respond to the flood of refugees and internally displaced people-a crisis that has grown in part due to sectarian violence. The Commission will hold the second of two public hearings on the situation in Iraq on Sept. 19. This hearing will examine intra-Muslim sectarian violence, including what role, if any, the Iraqi government currently plays in that violence. That hearing will also examine U.S. policy in relation to Iraq's refugee crisis. In the letter, the Commission urges several steps the U.S. government and Iraqis can take to boost protection of Iraq's endangered religious minority communities, including police training and the U.S. government convening a symposium of minority representatives to examine ways to improve security. It calls for increased humanitarian and development assistance and measures to ensure that aid reaches the intended beneficiaries. The Commission also recommends increased U.S. support for international agencies working with displaced people. The letter follows.

September 5, 2007 The Honorable Condoleezza Rice Secretary of State
United States Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Rice: On behalf of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, I strongly urge you to give the highest attention to the severe threat facing the smallest religious minorities in Iraq. During the Commission's meeting with you this past May, we expressed concern that the U.S. government was not taking adequate action to provide protection for these ancient communities, who include Chaldean Assyrian Christians, Sabeen Mandaean, Yazidis, and others, and that as a result of extremist violence and government harassment, they are facing extinction from lands they have occupied for over 2,000 years. While all Iraqis are threatened by violence, the non-Muslim minorities face particularized forms of harassment and abuse; what is more, these groups appear to suffer a degree of violent attacks and other human rights abuses disproportionate to their numbers. Indeed, last month's heinous attack deliberately targeting the Yazidi community was only the latest in a long line of similar attacks against similarly defenseless non-Muslim targets in Iraq. As you know, the Commission has long been raising concern about the plight of Iraq's religious minorities with Administration officials. As far back as December 2004, the Commission wrote to President Bush regarding the escalation of violent attacks against members of these groups. Earlier this year, the Commission added Iraq to its Watch List due to the alarming and deteriorating religious freedom conditions for all Iraqis, including the religious minorities. In July, the Commission held a hearing on the threats these minority communities face. We received testimony of minority members viciously and deliberately victimized by militants-and, witnesses claimed, even members of the police and security forces-that included murder, torture, and abductions for ransom; of parishioners sleeping on the floors of churches to escape death squads and insurgents; of families being given just one hour to vacate their homes; of expropriated land, forced conversions and extortion in the form of taxes on non-Muslims. On September 19, the Commission will hold a second public hearing on the grave situation in Iraq. This hearing will examine the causes, dimensions, and patterns of intra-Muslim sectarian violence, including the extent to which individual Muslims are being targeted for killings and other violence on account of their religious identity and what role, if any, the Iraqi government currently plays in that violence. That hearing will also examine U.S. policy in relation to Iraq's refugee crisis, focusing on internal displacement and Iraqis sheltering in neighboring countries.

Grave Threat to Religious Minorities
Violence against members of Iraq's Christian community occurs throughout the country, and the Commission has raised particular concern about reports from Baghdad, Mosul, Basra, and the northern Kurdish regions. Other reported abuses include the assassination of Christian religious leaders, the bombing and destruction of churches, enforced conformity with strict Islamic dress and behavioral codes, and violent threats that have forced people from their homes. In some areas, ordinary Christians have reportedly stopped participating in public religious services for fear of inviting further violence. Though smaller in number, Sabeen Mandaean and Yazidis have suffered similar abuses, as has the dwindling Jewish community. Extremists view members of these groups as infidels or outsiders who must be eliminated. What is more, religious minority communities reportedly lack means of protection, including local militia structures that might otherwise provide security. Faced with these harsh realities, thousands of members of Iraqi religious minorities have fled the country, seeking refuge in neighboring states and among growing diaspora communities in the West. According to some reports, nearly half of Iraq's indigenous Christian population is now living outside the country. Although comprising only 4-5 percent of Iraq's pre-war population, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that almost 40 percent of registered refugees are Christians. According to the Mandaean Society of America, approximately 85 percent of Iraqi Mandaeans have fled their country since 2003. With almost 2.2 million persons displaced within Iraq, equaling the number of Iraqis who have fled the country, there will soon be more internally displaced Iraqis than Iraqi refugees. Those fleeing sectarian violence are moving from religious and ethnically mixed communities to homogeneous ones as they seek safety and

protection. In the case of the non-Muslim groups, many are moving to the Nineveh Plains, an area located south of the Kurdish Regional Governorate and constituting a portion of the Nineveh Governorate. Commission Recommendations

With the rising sectarian violence, the Iraqi internally displaced persons (IDP) and refugee crises require heightened attention and more effective action by the U.S. government. Given the urgency of their plight, it was proposed at our May meeting that the U.S. government hold a series of conferences, both in and outside Iraq, bringing together representatives of Iraq's non-Muslim minorities, particularly civic leaders, mayors, and other locally elected officials, to hear directly from them what the United States could do to ensure their protection-indeed, their very survival-in Iraq. We respectfully request that you instruct the Department of State to follow up on this proposal, as there is clearly a pressing need to safeguard the presence of these ancient communities on their ancestral lands. In taking this and other actions to protect Iraq's endangered minority religious communities, the Commission respectfully proposes that the U.S. government should:

- Urgently convene, as discussed at our May 11 meeting, the symposium or summit of civic leaders, elected officials, and other representatives of Iraq's endangered religious minority communities to learn first-hand what actions could be taken to advance their security in Iraq. Among the actions that might be discussed at such a conference, in order to enforce protections for these minority communities, is the initiative to create an autonomous administrative district in the Nineveh Plains, as provided under article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution.
- Ensure that the U.S. government contributes promptly and sufficiently to UNHCR's revised appeal on Iraq to address the humanitarian concerns of Iraq's displaced population, encouraging other nations also to contribute to this appeal by our own example.
- Increase humanitarian assistance to Iraq, ensuring that non-Muslim minorities who, in the face of disproportionate levels of violence and fear of persecution, are fleeing to the Nineveh Plains, receive adequate aid; direct that that aid be distributed in coordination with local humanitarian and civil society organizations and international humanitarian agencies, as appropriate; and ensure that assistance reaches the intended beneficiaries.
- Support, working in consultation with civic leaders, elected officials, and other representatives of minority religious groups, basic infrastructure development projects, including water, electricity, and roads, in the largely undeveloped Nineveh Plains so that members of minority religious communities fleeing violence can resettle in a region that is the ancestral land for many of them, and seek international support for these and similar initiatives.
- Urge, at the highest levels, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to respond to complaints that it is taking or encroaching on these ancestral lands and the other areas in the Nineveh Plains populated by members of Iraq's minority religious communities, and ensure that the KRG is not facilitating any form of encroachment; and urge the KRG to investigate and hold accountable any officials or others acting in the name of the KRG who have improperly exercised power to deprive local minority communities of their property, land, houses, or other items essential to their survival.
- Authorize U.S. police trainers to train local police forces in the Nineveh Plains from among the minority religious communities-most of whom are defenseless victims of various Sunni, Shi'a, or Kurdish militants-so that they can protect the security of their community members and themselves, and investigate any alleged abuse of power by KRG officials.
- Work promptly, both independently and with its allies, to facilitate family reunification abroad for the remaining-and reportedly highly vulnerable-small Jewish minority.
- Reexamine and subject to independent review U.S. government data collection procedures with regard to killings, abuses, and other atrocities in Iraq, particularly those collection procedures carried out by the Department of Defense, to ensure maximum reliability and accuracy, and add explicit data categories to record the killings and other abuses that specifically target religious minority communities there. Maintaining accurate data in this area is crucial, especially in light of the grave threat facing many of those ancient communities.
- Ensure the continuation of privately-run peace and reconciliation efforts among Iraq's various religious leaders and facilitate these exchanges, despite ongoing insecurity, by providing, as appropriate, for such sessions to be held outside Iraq.

After our next hearing, the Commission intends to issue additional recommendations on Iraq addressing the problem of the intra-Muslim sectarian violence and related religious freedom abuses, which we plan to forward to you at that time. Madame Secretary, the situation for the non-Muslim minority communities in Iraq has gone beyond critical. As we said when we met with you, it is time for the U.S. government to act. Canon White told us at our July hearing that "We ... need to face the fact that we in the coalition have seriously ignored and failed to deal with the plight of minorities. Therefore we must accept a considerable amount of responsibility for the present crisis." Clearly, given the U.S. government's role in the developments that have resulted in the dire situation currently facing the imperiled members of Iraq's religious minority communities, our country has a special obligation to provide them protection and thereby attempt to secure their continued existence in Iraq.

Sincerely,
 Michael Cromartie
 Chair

cc: John D. Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State
 R. Nicholas Burns, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs
 Paula J. Dobriansky, Undersecretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs
 Jonathan Farrar, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
 John V. Hanford, III, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom
 David Satterfield, Senior Adviser, Coordinator for Iraq
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