

July 25, 2007: USCIRF Hearing: Threats to Iraq's Communities of Antiquity

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 25, 2007

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When: Wednesday, July 25, 2007

Where: Russell Senate Office Building, Room 485 MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Ladies and gentlemen, if I could ask you to turn off all mechanical and electrical cell phones and Blackberries. I appreciate it. Good morning. My name is Michael Cromartie. I'm the chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. We're glad to have you here. I'd like to welcome you to our hearing to examine the serious threats faced by Iraq's communities of antiquity, the country's non-Muslim religious minorities, including the Chaldean-Assyrians, the Yazidis, the Sabeen Mandaeans, the other minority religious groups we're going to hear about this morning. Today's hearing is the first of two hearings that we're going to conduct. The second is scheduled for September and will focus on the Sunni-Shi'a sectarian violence, including the Iraqi government's role in that as well as the U.S. response to this very profound refugee crisis we see now. I'd like to take the opportunity also to acknowledge my fellow commissioner, Nina Shea, for all the work she's done, in fact, to keep this issue in the public eye and to help with this hearing. Now, this year, the commission added Iraq to its Watch List of countries requiring close monitoring because of the nature and extent of the violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by their governments, a major decision, because of the alarming and deteriorating religious freedom conditions for all Iraqis. Despite efforts to stabilize the country, successive Iraqi governments have not yet adequately curbed the growing scope and severity of human rights abuses. Although non-state actors, particularly the Sunni-dominated insurgency, are responsible for a substantial proportion of the sectarian violence and associated human rights violations, the Iraqi government also bears responsibility. Also influencing our decision to place Iraq on our Watch List are the grave conditions affecting the minority religious groups in Iraq. These groups appear to suffer a degree of attacks and other human rights abuses disproportionate to their numbers. As a result, thousands of members of the Iraqi religious communities have fled the country, seeking refuge in neighboring states. Violence against members of Iraq's Christian community is a particular concern in Baghdad and the northern Kurdish regions. Reported abuses include the assassination of Christian religious leaders, the bombing and destruction of churches and violent threats intended to force Christians from their homes. In some areas, ordinary Christians have reportedly stopped participating in public religious services for fear of inviting further violence. Though small in number, the Sabeen Mandaeans and the Yazidis have suffered abuses similar to the Christians. Extremists view members of these groups as infidels or as outsiders. What is more, religious martyr communities often lack the tribal base or the military structures that might otherwise provide security. And they are often targeted by both Sunni insurgents and Shi'a militias. According to some reports, nearly half of Iraq's indigenous Christian population is now living outside the country. According to the Mandaean Society of America, approximately 85 percent of Iraqi Mandaeans have fled the country since 2003. This forced exodus may mean the end of the presence in Iraq of ancient Christian and other religious communities that have lived on those same lands for 2,000 years. Together with the rising tide of sectarian violence, conditions for religious minorities and the associated Iraqi refugee crisis require heightened attention and more effective action by the U.S. government. And that's why we're having this hearing. Let me ask that the witnesses on each panel please keep their allotted time of 10 minutes in order to allow time for follow-up questions. And all the witnesses have been asked to submit their longer statements, which have been posted on our Web site, and which also are in your packets. We have also asked the Embassy of Iraq and representative of Iraq's Kurdish regional government to submit written statements for the record. Now, we are very privileged to have with us Representative Anna Eshoo here with us. And we'd like to have some comments from you, if we could please. And also, Representative Christopher Shays is here. If I could hear from, yes, ma'am; thank you for coming. Okay, good, good, okay, yes, we'll have you sit right here, please. We do want to get it on camera. REPRESENTATIVE ANNA ESHOO (D-CA): Good morning, Mr. Chairman and honorable members of the commission. It is an honor to have been invited by you to come and testify today to the commission about Iraq's religious and ethnic minorities. As the only Assyrian-American member of the entire Congress, I have a deeply personal interest in this issue. Obviously, I'm proud to be a first-generation American of Assyrian and Armenian descent. My Assyrian grandparents fled their ancestral homelands in what was then the Ottoman Empire, now the northern border area between Iraq and Iran, in the early part of the 20th century. In fact, my mother received her first holy communion in Baghdad in the midst of her family's escape from the chaos that has historically plagued this part of the world. Today, as you might know, there are approximately 400,000 Assyrian-Americans in the United States, and they are all Christians. Some are Chaldeans; and this is the oldest rite under Rome, as well as Jacobites, Armenians, Greek Orthodox, Mandaeans, and others. They have been subject to chronic and brutal persecution in their homeland, and by all accounts, their oppression has only worsened since the fall of Saddam Hussein. They represent the oldest surviving Christian population in the world, and one that, without help, is literally facing the brink of extinction. Just parenthetically, I speak Assyrian. I do; I can speak it rather fluently - not as quickly as I would like to. And I do understand the language very well. Today, the numbers of Christians remaining in Iraq, mainly in the Nineveh Plain in the north around Mosul, are rapidly diminishing. Those remaining live in villages that can trace their history back to over 2,000 years ago. They still celebrate their liturgies in Aramaic, which is the language that Jesus spoke. So these are the indigenous Christians in that part of the world. I've met with several prominent Assyrian leaders in recent years, some of whom are here today. And without exception, they've communicated to me their genuine desire to embrace the opportunity before them to

move away from the totalitarianism of the Hussein regime toward greater prosperity and stability by cooperating in the development of a democratic and pluralistic state. But religious and ethnic tensions, unchecked acts of discrimination, and unspeakable acts of violence continue to plague these communities. I think that you might recall the front page of the New York Times last year above the fold in color the church that had been bombed and burned out, and the members of that parish surrounding it. Now, in my discussion with leaders in Congress and those representing Assyrian communities in Iraq, there are two factors, which I believe contribute significantly to the current crisis. My own observation is that Assyrians - and they are, I believe - the largest ethnic religious minority in Iraq - are in so many ways victims of geography. During my grandparents' time, they weren't even considered second-class citizens. And so, they were small communities that kept to themselves because they were Christian. They have, in these times, when I traveled to Baghdad, and more than once, and meeting with our military, they were very familiar with the Assyrians, and said, they have lived side-by-side with Sunnis, with Shi'a, and have really gotten along with everyone there. But they represent, obviously, a very, very small part of the overall population. Getting back to what contributes significantly, I believe, to what is a crisis, first the persistent indications that Iraq's religious minority populations do not receive by any means their fair share of development assistance. I wish I had a penny for every time someone asked me about my surname and what it is. It is very unfamiliar. There is a real unfamiliarity with people from that part of the world, certainly Assyrians. Because they represent such a small community, their voice in national politics is relatively weak. There is some representation in the parliament; I have met with them. When I've traveled to Iraq, I've spoken to the head of the country and pointed this out, they listened. They really did not - subject matter didn't grab them, let's say. Funding for reconstruction, for housing, for education, are parceled out by central authorities to those who control the villages and the regions where they reside, without really sufficient transparency to ensure the proper parity between different ethnic and religious communities. I attempted to address this issue two years ago by offering an amendment to the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for fiscal years 2006 and 2007. My amendment called on the State Department and all relevant U.S. agencies to direct their attention to the needs of Iraq's indigenous religious minorities. I am pleased to say it received unanimous approval in the House of Representatives. But since its passage, little evidence has been presented to indicate that progress is being made to assist these communities and the people that reside in them. Meanwhile, reports continue about Iraqi minorities being targets of kidnappings, bombings, assassinations, and acts of violence, due to their religious practices and beliefs. My appeals to the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Department of Defense, and other federal entities have unfortunately received faint acknowledgement. The visible result of this neglect has been the current crisis of Iraqi refugees, which the chairman spoke of in his opening statement. This brings me to the second area where I see a serious failure in our current policy. When I offered my amendment in 2005, I quoted estimates on the floor of the House indicating that as many as 80,000 Iraqi Christians out of a population previously estimated to be 1.2 million have fled Iraq. Today, two years later, I've seen reports indicating that as many as half of the entire Iraqi Christian population has left the country, fled the country, with thousands more internally displaced within Iraq. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Christians today make up approximately 3 percent of Iraq's population. But they represent nearly 40 percent of the total number of refugees fleeing Iraq. That's a stunning statistic. In fact, Iraqi refugees now comprise some 14 percent of the Jordanian population, another stunning figure. Here in the United States, we have had and will continue to have an emotionally charged debate about issues surrounding undocumented immigrants. Imagine for a moment what the tenor of the debate would be if we were facing an influx of the proportions that I just stated. Often those who flee their homes and leave Iraq encounter governments not willing to grant legal status or assistance or the right to employment. This is a tragic situation that requires, I believe, a comprehensive and assertive response to resolve the many issues facing the displaced, and to adequately provide for the safety of those remaining in Iraq. In the last month, 73 of my House colleagues joined me in writing to President Bush urging him to take seriously the grave warnings which were personally expressed to him by his Holiness, Pope Benedict, for Iraq's endangered Christian population. As the pope laid out to the president in clear and unequivocal terms, we're witnessing the emergence of an Iraq that simply does not tolerate Christians and religious minorities. Clearly, the rights of minority groups are not being protected in Iraq. And I'm convinced that without really important and drastic improvement in the current situation, we may well witness the complete loss of the Iraqi indigenous Christian community. And I think that would be absolutely tragic. I continue to work on this issue in Congress. Last month, we passed a provision in the fiscal year 2008 Department of State and Foreign Appropriations bill requiring that \$10 million be provided directly to assist religious minorities in the Nineveh Plain region of northern Iraq. We have our work cut out for us to protect this provision - as my wonderful colleague Chris Shays would fully appreciate - to protect this provision as the bill goes to conference. But I believe that between this funding allocation and the very broad bipartisan support in the House, all of my colleagues that signed the letter to the president, I'm hopeful that our work to promote attention to the welfare of Iraq's religious minority populations will bear fruit. Of course, all of this is under the umbrella of the ongoing war, and war is hell. But this particular group of minorities, Christians in Iraq, I think little known, little appreciated, is suffering enormously. So in closing, I'm very grateful to everyone here today that has come here today. There are people that are in the audience that have traveled from across the country to be here today, which underscores the importance of the issue and the depth of their passions about the issue as well as their knowledge of it. And certainly, to you, all of the commissioners, it's a source of pride to me that the Congress established this Commission on International Religious Freedom. This is an important hearing and I am really honored to have been invited by you to be here today. This is obviously a critical issue that has yet to receive its proper recognition and a response to it. And because I am a person of great hope and the great faith that my family instilled in me - and it took great faith for them to have endured what they did, the stories that my grandparents related to me as a child on their knee - I think speaks to the people that I've testified on behalf of today. And I think this hearing can really help to strengthen the case to assist the beleaguered Christians in Iraq as well as those that still call it their homeland and hopefully can return there someday in peace and be able to practice the faith of their fathers. Thank you

very, very much. MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you, Congresswoman. Thank you very much. We're honored to have you and we thank you for coming. Congressman Shays. REPRESENTATIVE CHRISTOPHER SHAYS (R-CT): You rightfully heard, I think, a very extensive presentation by my colleague. And I'd just like to associate myself with her. I've hit my stopwatch and I'll go no more than four minutes, because I can just basically say that I'm moved by what my colleague said, and agree with her. I also want to say that as a member of Congress, I am extraordinarily proud to be able to say "the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom." I am proud that my country would establish you. I am proud that you would be so active. And I think that your work is highly important. Iraq was on the Watch List - or more than that - before we basically invaded Iraq. You took it off for a while, and now it's on the Watch List, and it deserves to be so. In my first trip - and I guess my value added is as a former Peace Corps volunteer and someone who has visited Iraq 17 times - I get a flow of what is going on there. And the first time I was there, I met a man named Mohammed Abdul Hassan. It was April 2003. The fighting hadn't yet totally been completed. And he was telling me things about what we do and so on, and things that make him concerned. Things that I learned immediately is that the Iraqi people are an extraordinarily proud people. They're a very tough people. He described his life in an Iranian prison, and he got married in his 50s now, and he was starting to have a family. And I said, boy, you've had a tough life. And he looked at me in amazement and said, my life is no different than any other Iraqi. Finally, when we ended, he put his hands on my shoulder and said, you don't know us and we don't know you. I think of Mithal al Alusi who was part of the de-Baathification commission. He goes to Jerusalem to participate in a Muslim-Christian - both a Muslim and a Christian forum and a Jewish forum. And when he returns, he is kicked off the de-Baathification commission. His guards are taken, there are two attempts on his life; and then the beginning of '06, his two children are killed trying to defend him. This is a place that doesn't have a lot of tolerance for people who have tolerance. And we're right to pay attention to it. So as my colleague has rightfully pointed out, we have a lot of people whose lives are at risk who are looking to find some safe haven. And I'd like to point out to you legislation that Mr. Blumenauer has moved forward that would set up a program to allow 15,000 Iraqis and their families who are at risk, because they helped us in Iraq to enter the U.S., to come in for each of the next four years. Believe it or not, those who are religious minorities are viewed as having helped us. It would also, in addition, increase the number of Iraqis who can enter in addition to 15,000-20,000. I think it's important for this commission to make it a very high priority to provide safety for these individuals, because the fact is, with all the mistakes we made - the allowing the looting, totally eliminating all security - I mean, no police, no border patrol, no army - and then asking 150,000 coalition forces to protect a nation of 26 million people, we just allowed unbelievable insecurity and we got rid of what people basically have a right to expect - that they would be able to live in a land where there would be security. And so, the governments are not capable of protecting the public in general, and they have no interest in protecting the minorities in particular. So you have the government of Iraq that is aggressively seeking out people, and in many cases, if you're not one of them - and you are a small minority - you are going to be taken; you are going to be questioned; and your lives are going to be threatened. That's what the government is doing, and then in addition, as is rightfully pointed out, you have the Shi'a militia that have tended to be very unfriendly to these religious minorities. So I think our first task is to recognize that problem exists, secondly to find ways to help some of these individuals find safety, and as my colleague has pointed out, you have between 2-4 million refugees, probably 2 million who have left, 2 million that are seeking some kind of status. We have burdened neighboring countries. So I would respectfully suggest that this Commission be actively promoting this United States doing, at the minimum, what we should be doing, but even doing more than that. I thank you. Sorry, I went on five minutes. MR. CROMARTIE: No, no, we appreciate very much the honor that you both could be here, and we thank you so much for coming. Now, you have in your packets the biographies of our speakers. And our first speaker, we are very grateful and honored to have Reverend Canon Andrew White with us. Sir, many of us are great admirers of you from far away, and we thank you for being here. We have great regard and respect for the work that you do. And we thank you for coming this morning, Reverend Canon White. REVEREND CANON ANDREW WHITE: Thank you very much. I'm very grateful to you for inviting me. The only reason I was able to come was that 10 days ago, the terrorists were threatening to kill me in Iraq, so I had to go home, so I can be with you today. I actually live in Baghdad. I am the only non-Iraqi who leads an Iraqi church in Iraq. My church is in Baghdad. It's made up of approximately 1,300 people. It is an Anglican church and none of my people are Anglicans. They simply come to church because it is the closest church to come to in the midst of great danger. And for that reason, we do not try and convert anybody to our faith tradition. So we have Chaldean Assyrians, Assyrian Ancient Church of the East, Old and New Calendar. We have people from the Armenian community. And I have promised all the bishops that we will not try and convert any of their people. Things have been very bad for the minorities in Iraq, not least the Christians, the Mandaeans, the Yazidis, but also the Jews as well. And we must not forget the Jews. And one of my real concerns is, as a person who takes on responsibility of looking after the Jewish community, nobody will even talk about them. They are too afraid to, so I'd like to mention them in brief afterwards. Christianity in Iraq, as we have already heard, has been from the very beginning of time. And religion as we know it today really arrived by submarine transportation to Nineveh about 2,700 years ago. And another miserable person turned up 2,000 years ago called Doubting Thomas. He was on his way to India walking and stopped off in Nineveh and said, didn't you know your messiah had come? And they said, no, we didn't, so they all believed in him. And that's how we have so many Christians in Iraq up until this day. I learned about the submarine transportation guy quite negatively because I tried to have a party on the Fast Day of Jonah, and I didn't realize it was the Fast Day of Jonah, so I learned the hard way. But in the last three or four months, things have deteriorated very considerably. Things are bad for everybody in Iraq. But in the last few months, we have seen that things have deteriorated very considerably for the minorities of Iraq. And by that, I mean the Assyrians, the Yazidis, the Mandaeans, and the Jewish community as well. They have been, as we heard earlier, kidnapped, killed, tortured, massacred. Two weeks ago, I sat down with my congregation on Saturday in Baghdad as I do every Saturday, and I said to them, tell me your story, what's happened in the past week? And the people went through what had happened, and I

realized that 36 of my congregation in that past week had been kidnapped. None of them had been returned. The only one we managed to get back was one of our lay pastors, because we had found sufficient money to pay the ransom for his return. And so, we're faced with huge immigration, but not only immigration outside of the country. We have a huge number of internally displaced people. That number is estimated to be about 2 million internally displaced in Iraq, of which a large proportion of those people are Christians. One of the very worrying things about this increasing number of internally displaced people is that they have been removed very much as a result of Islamic terrorism. And I work continually with the Islamic leaders as well. My main job is working on religious sectarianism in Iraq. But on Saturdays, I look after my Iraqi church, and on Sunday, my American congregation in the IZ. But what we are seeing now is that the Christians, for example, from areas just part of Baghdad, such as Dora have completely had to move out of Dora. They were given no choice - either you pay a large amount of jiziah tax or you convert or we kill you. And a large number of Assyrians are now literally living on the church floors of some of the Assyrian churches in Baghdad. The situation is more than desperate. Violence against all Christians is increasing all the time. And the reasons for this violence increasing is given as the fact that they are not Muslims. They belong to a Western religion, which we know is far from true, because we got our religion from there. They are also seen as being very close to the coalition, and we must not forget that fact. One of the major problems that is faced by the Christians today is their links with the coalition. The coalition has failed the Christians. We have done nothing to support the Christian community or the increased Christian suffering in places such as Baghdad and Nineveh. A lot of Christians have not only fled to Syria and Jordan, but they have also fled to the north. And it is a fact that in the north, the Kurdish government are doing their best to support the Christians, despite what some may say. We've got to be very careful of Assyrians or Iraqis who do not live in Iraq and have not lived in Iraq giving the answer as to what is truly going on. We have seen a lot of artificial information given as regards not least the Assyrians by people who do not live there and are not with the people all the time. The requirements of the Christian communities are very considerable. First of all, they need security. And some of the Christian leaders, not least the ZOWA party that I work particularly closely with, have called for a safe place for the Christians. Others have called for a 19th province. There are 18 governments in Iraq, and some have called for a 19th government. But the Christians need food, water, and the ability to worship. So far, no government has helped them. No government has understood their need. There has been a fundamental lack of understanding of the religious nature of the conflict that we are now facing. And so, the Christians and the other minorities need provision and engagement. They need provision of basic life sustaining products, and they need engagement with other religious groups who may be able to change things and bring about some difference. Some of you may have heard recently of our major work as regards the inter-religious congress of Iraq where we brought together the Shi'a, the Sunni, the Mandaean, the Yazidis, the Christians, the Kurds. And two of my close colleagues, Bob McFarlane (sp) and Jerry Jones are here this morning. And they have really enabled this whole process to take place. And since that meeting, we have had invitation from various Islamic leaders not least to take the Christian leaders to meet with them in order to talk through this issue and to see how the various Islamic groups can actually support the Christians. They are acutely aware nowadays that the Christians are in need and under great, enormous threat. As regards the Jewish community, if I could just mention it in passing, people will not talk about it. People are too scared. It is the oldest Jewish community in the world. I look after them. I've taken their food, their money, every month. I know every single one of the Jews left in Iraq. There are very few of them. They have been killed as well. They have been murdered. They have been kidnapped. And everybody, including the Christians, are too scared to talk about them or their needs. I will not leave the Jews either. I see my task as looking after the Jews as well as the Christians, even though the press said last week that I was an Israeli spy. But that's quite a common feature. So we need to also think of the Jews. As regards provision of these people, nothing has been provided as far as I have met. None of the Christians I have seen have ever received any help. We have huge needs of the Christians in Jordan and Syria. But the needs within Iraq itself are quite huge. I love my people. I love my church. It is the best church I have ever had. And I am the only non-Iraqi there. And it causes me great sorrow to see that the international community, including my own nation and yours, has not really done anything to help these people. And the fact is, they are suffering because of us. And I agree that we needed to remove Saddam Hussein from power. I think that the war was right. I think that even the present activities of General Petraeus are right. I meet with him very regularly. I am delighted he is there. He is doing an incredible job. I'm delighted that for the first time now, we have the Department of Defense working with us in a way that we have never had before. And they are very strategic to all of our efforts. And I'm very pleased that with General Petraeus, if I don't get a chance to say something in the week, I can always preach it to him on Sunday, because he does come to church. So there are my initial brief comments. It's a dire situation. But together, we can make a difference. And we must make a difference. And I am so grateful to you as a Commission for taking this seriously and for being willing to engage with this issue. Thank you.

MR. CROMARTIE: Reverend White, thank you so much. We appreciate you coming. We have some questions from the commission. And one of my commissioners has come down from the shuttle in New York and is going back, so I am going to ask Felice Gaer to have the first question, because I want to make sure that you are able to do that before you go back to New York. And I need to give you this.

FELICE GAER: Thank you very much, Michael. Thank you very much, Canon White, first of all for your courage, secondly, for everything you're doing, and for coming here today and telling us about that. I know you were the recipient of the Tannenbaum prize a few years ago, and I can't think of anybody more deserving of that.

CANON WHITE: Thank you.

MS. GAER: I wanted to probe two points that you raised. You said that there was a fundamental misunderstanding of the religious nature of this conflict. And I wondered if you could elaborate on that in particular, with reference to the Christian community and the other minority communities, and how they - and the degree to which you see that as part of that. Secondly, I wanted to thank you for your remarks about the Jewish persons left in Iraq. No one hears about this. And your own ministering to them is something I, first of all, I wanted on the record to thank you for that. But I wanted to go beyond that. Kidnappings, murders, and the like affecting that community as well as other communities - what special problems do they face and do

you have any recommendations that you would like to make to us as to what could be done with regard to their situation. And as you well know, there was a problem with the constitution early on as to whether Jews would be allowed to return to Iraq like other refugees and others who were exiled from the country for one reason or another earlier. And if you had any comments on that situation, I'd appreciate it.

CANON WHITE: I'll start with the latter point first. The Jewish community in Iraq is very, very small. They have suffered enormously, but their greatest point of suffering was probably a year ago, when the leader of the community was actually kidnapped. The shul, or the synagogue, is now only used by one person. As Donny George will be able to tell you, there are huge amounts of Jewish treasures in the Museum of Baghdad, but people are afraid still with this issue. I have talked very considerably to various governmental people in Iraq. And they have not been willing to engage on this issue. Only one member of the government has been willing to engage on this issue, but he said do not tell anybody that I want to help with this matter. The congressman mentioned earlier the work of Mr. Alusi, a member of the Council of Representatives here in Iraq, and the enormous tragedy which he had to face after he went to Israel. And the death of his two sons was indeed related to that. And I still work with him, and he is still willing to engage on this issue. It's an enormous problem. There is no way that any Jewish agency or Jewish fund can help or support these people. There is no way to get money into them. And I would like to say that even though I do take money to them every single month, they gave a certain amount of that money to Muslims who are suffering. And they do not work as a whole community. They can't go around saying we are the Jewish community. But they really have tried to help the suffering Iraqis, generally. And even though they are very small and they have suffered very greatly, they still want to help those who suffer as well as themselves. Now, one of the great problems is that those who we have left do not want to go to Israel. If it was a matter of taking them to Israel, we could do it. The Israelis are more than willing to welcome them from Jordan and to take them in. These people want to actually go to Holland, because there is a number of the Iraqi Jewish community in Holland already, and Holland will not receive them. We've got a huge dilemma. Do we want to maintain the Jews in Iraq or do we want them all to leave? It's very, very difficult. I personally think they should all leave, because they have no future, no security, no ability to survive at the moment. As regards religious sectarianism, from the days of invasion I said to all in authority in the CPA, I said we've got to start dealing with the religious issues. And I was told this is not a religious country. I was told that sectarianism won't happen here, because religion isn't very prominent. I said to them that religion was kept down by Saddam Hussein, but that doesn't mean it will not come back. And what we are seeing now is that the majority of violence is religious in orientation. People are committing violence in God's name, and they think they're doing the work of God. We've got to seriously engage with this issue and enable this process of reconciliation to take place. You see, reconciliation isn't just political. It has to be religious as well, and that is what we have been trying to do with the help of DOD. And frankly speaking, they're the only ones who understand and hence only ones who help us. Not the British military, not the British Foreign Office, the American Department of Defense. They understand. State Department, frankly speaking, does not understand. Nobody else has understood; I'm sure there are lots of State Department here but the truth is that they have been absolutely helpless. I don't mince my words. Sorry about that.

MR. CROMARTIE: No, we appreciate that. Canon White, could I follow up that question then? How is the - how do you feel the Iraqi government is - are they helping your efforts to stem the sectarian violence? Did they know that -

CANON WHITE: The Iraqi government are, in theory, very helpful, but the fact is that there's increasing influence from Iran on the Iraqi government, and the whole concept of Iraqi democracy has not really worked. What we actually needed in Iraq was some kind of benevolent dictatorship. Democracy as we have it at the moment does not work in Iraq - doesn't work in the Middle East. If we look at the two countries with some kind of stability in the Middle East, we look at Jordan and Morocco, they are benevolent dictatorships. But I'm probably not supposed to say that either.

MR. CROMARTIE: But when you go to them with your concerns, is there a concern on their part to help curb this religious violence?

CANON WHITE: Certainly with the prime minister there's a very major concern, and the last time that I went to the prime minister was actually with Bud McFarlane. We went and we discussed this in depth with the prime minister, and he said he saw this as one of the biggest issues facing Iraq today, and the most significant aspect of the demand for reconciliation and the only way to move forward. At the moment, we are doing it all on a shoestring budget, and the problem is that we are continually forced to try and work within Western, American or British style of practice when, with these religious leaders, it does not work. I really think we can work towards reconciliation and we can help Christian and Jewish communities by engagement with religious leaders, predominantly with the Sunni and the Shi'a communities, but we need to be empowered to do it.

MR. CROMARTIE: Let me call on Commissioner Shea and then Commissioner Land.

NINA SHEA: Thank you very much, Canon White, especially for making time to come to Washington for this quick trip. I know that you're on a plane this afternoon, too. You have been just a tireless, passionate and courageous defender of the Iraqi people for these past four years, and even before that. I guess I have two questions. One is that you paint a very dire situation for these minority populations inside Iraq, and you've also mentioned the northern area, the Nineveh Plain area, and I'm wondering is that part of the temporary solution, that the internally placed be supported there where it's relatively quiet and peaceful? That they be given urgent emergency aid, but also some minimal infrastructure so that they can establish themselves there and wait out the violence because they will not survive, it seems, in the central and southern parts of the country while this sectarian violence continues? My other question, and I guess it's a - these are big questions, but my other one concerns your reconciliation session that you've had and what that was like. You've been optimistic about this, and I would like you to give us a little window of what created the encouragement. What gave you encouragement from that session?

CANON WHITE: Well, if I can take, first, the issue of the Nineveh Plains, none of us wanted to see the Christians move to a particular area. None of us wanted to see the Christians in an enclave. The reality is that today it is so dangerous for the Christians of Iraq. They could only go to an area if they were given security and if they were given the infrastructure to survive, food and accommodation and water. We have everything planned, everything budgeted for, and nobody to help us. We could do it very, very soon, but there is no means of doing it. As regards the reconciliation process, what gives us

hope there is that we have a large number of people who were involved in militancy and terrorism who have come over to the way of peace. We will lose all of them if we do not have the funds to take forward this work, and the funds will need to be provided in a way that is not Western. We have these people on board because we have worked with them for years. I've known some of these people for over a decade, and you don't become their friends overnight. I just returned from Dubai where I've been with Ahmad Al-Kubaisi, one of the big Sunni leaders, and I've known him for a long time, and I've seen the change. The fact is that these Sunni leaders we are working with were actually willing to come to Najaf and see Ali al-Sistani. They're willing to meet together with the Shi'a leaders. I'm talking now about the most senior people who could not come to Baghdad for our conference. I'm delighted that Bud McFarlane was actually able to be with us for that conference, but once again, it was insisted that we had the conference in Iraq. I'm still not convinced it was the right place to have it, not just because we had no water or air conditioning for three days in 130 degrees of heat, but because so many of the key Iraqi religious leaders are now outside of Iraq. And yet, they are still having a major influence, not least an influence on the violence inside Iraq, but nobody wants to admit that so many of the key people are outside the country and controlling things from outside. No other time we're faced with these kind of policies that we have to try and abide by and believe in. They do not work. They're often totally obsolete, and as long as we have to abide by those policies, there's no way really forward. We have to be really radical. We've messed up in the last four years. We can save things, but we've got to behave in a very radical manner. MR. CROMARTIE: Canon White, before I call on Commissioner Land, could I just ask a quick follow up question to my earlier question. I asked earlier whether the Iraqi government was assisting you and what their concerns were, but now I want to ask a more provocative question. Is the Iraqi government playing any kind of role in the sectarian violence do you think? CANON WHITE: Probably, yes, because we know for a fact that so many of the parties involved in the Iraqi Parliament as we have it are actually organizations which support terrorist activity. MR. CROMARTIE: Is the prime minister trying to curb them? CANON WHITE: The prime minister's trying, but he's fairly powerless. It's all terrible. The government is the most corrupt government I've ever met, and I'm delighted to see that Pascale is here, because in the days when she was a minister, it was better, wasn't it? Now look at it today in these terrible - the Prime Minister al-Maliki - I actually trust him. I like him. I think he's a good man. I think we can work with him. He wants to very much support us in our work, but as regards for the rest of his ministers, most of them are corrupt, except Wijdan (Mikhail-Ed.), who's the only Christian. It's very depressing. MR. CROMARTIE: Commissioner Land. Thank you for your candor. RICHARD LAND: Andrew, it's good to see you again, and - CANON WHITE: Good to see you not in Yasser Arafat's compound with me - (chuckles). MR. LAND: That was an interesting day. It was Kafka-esque. I guess my main question is what can the United States government do to help improve protections for the members of Iraq's minority religious communities, and what role can the United States and the international community play in protecting refugees from Iraq's most vulnerable groups? CANON WHITE: Right, the United States can do a huge amount, but it has to do it, not talk about it and write papers on it all the time. I go to meetings in the embassy in Baghdad and we discuss things every week, and we write papers on how dreadful the situation is, and we do nothing. The time of writing papers and discussing is over. What could we do? We need to provide security and it's very interesting to note that even in our reconciliation process, people were saying to us we do not want Iraqi security, Iraqi police, Iraqi army. We just trust the Americans. So we've got to take that as a fact that so many Iraqis themselves can actually at least trust the American military for providing the right security. So we need security provided, we need provision of food, water and places to worship, and either we do that and we will see a certain saving of the minorities - it won't be easy; it'll be really difficult, and I mean for all the minority communities - or else there is no chance for any of them and they will all finish in demise. MR. LAND: I have a follow up question. In your opinion, as someone who's been there on the ground, what would happen in the immediate aftermath if there were to be a massive American military withdrawal? CANON WHITE: Well, frankly speaking, there would be more blood flowing in the streets than we have already, but we also have to face the facts that the American military is doing very little, if anything, to protect the minorities at the moment. But there would be a considerable decline in the minority communities. The fact is that we went to war. We actually were party to enabling a lot of these problems. We can't just leave them. I know people might want us to, and people might say that we should, but they haven't been there. They're not on the ground. If we leave them - if we pull out - I dread to think what will happen. We have the best general we've ever had - commanding general. He's outstanding, and he's aware of the problems, and he is trying to do what he can with the limitations that he has, but things are very serious. MR. LAND: Thank you, and thank you for your bravery as well as your candor. MR. CROMARTIE: Commissioner Leo. LEONARD LEO: Thank you very much for being with us this morning and for your tremendous courage and faith in the face of so much danger and challenge in Iraq. CANON WHITE: Can I just say something? The only reason I can stay in Iraq is because of my people who are all Iraqi and they're all Christian. Without them, I would not be able to do it. They give me the courage; they give me the strength, the love and the support. MR. LEO: Well, that's real testament to them as well. On several occasions during your testimony, you indicated that there were tremendous needs for security, food, water, perhaps a safe place, and then ultimately engagement of the various communities. At the same time, in your testimony, you indicated on a couple of occasions that the situation with the government is very precarious. You have a prime minister who you respect and trust, but who is, as you put it, relatively powerless. You have a parliament that has a number of elements within it which are more than happy to foster terrorism, and you have a number of ministers who are ostensibly corrupt or incompetent. And so my question to you is given that state of the infrastructure, even if people were in the position to disperse the kinds of money or funds that would be needed to provide the kind of security, food, water, accommodation that may be necessary, it strikes me the problem is far more systemic. You don't have an infrastructure to disperse the resources in a way to help the Christians. How do you deal with that problem? It seems to me what you're saying is it's not just about money and resources, but you've got a serious fundamental political problem within the country that needs to be dealt with as well, otherwise none of these things are going to flow properly. CANON WHITE: The fact is that the only way to actually deal with these needs is through the

communities themselves, and the communities can actually take care of these issues. If it's all done through the government, nothing will ever happen. If it's done through the communities, if we help the Assyrians through the Chaldean-Assyrian groups, if we help the various Yazidi and Mandaean groups, we can do something. If we go through the governmental structures, we're wasting our time. MR. CROMARTIE: Canon White, did you say that General Petraeus worships in your church? CANON WHITE: Yes. MR. CROMARTIE: Well, you must know him well then. What are the limitations on General Petraeus right now do you think? CANON WHITE: The limitations on General Petraeus are predominantly the government of Iraq and the American position. I'm very worried about the American position, and the problem is that so much is in regard to the American position and it influences the whole of the world. And yet, most Americans do not really know what's happening on the ground, but their position, their attitudes will influence exactly what happens in Iraq, and we're scared. We are very, very frightened. What is going to happen, we do not know. MR. LAND: What are the limitations from the Iraqi government? CANON WHITE: The limitations from the Iraqi government - they are many fold. MR. LAND: On Petraeus. CANON WHITE: On Petraeus - Petraeus is trying to work with the Iraqis. It's very difficult. Very, very difficult. We've got to realize that General Petraeus has one of the hardest jobs in the world, if not the hardest job in the world, because he's working with people who say one thing and do another thing. And sadly, I do not have total confidence any longer in the Iraqi government. I used to. The Iraqi government used to be good, but that was for a very short time. How long was it, Pascale? How long was the Iraqi government good for? PASCALE WARDA: It was a time of eight months. CANON WHITE: For eight months. It was good for eight months. MR. CROMARTIE: Commissioner Gaer. MS. GAER: Thank you very much. Canon White, you spoke about both the incompetence and the corruptness of the current government, but you also told us that the community receives complaints that they're following a quote unquote "Western religion," although you yourself point to the geographical incorrectness of that characterization. But I wonder if you could tell us if you feel that the Christian and, well particularly the Christian community in Iraq, is targeted because of its association with the United States. And if you could give us any indication of any ways in which it is targeted that is different from the targeting, say, of Muslim sectarian communities or other minorities. CANON WHITE: This is actually a very real issue because whether we like it or not, the fact is that the Christians are targeted because they're seen as belonging to Western religious tradition. It is seen as an immoral tradition. It is seen as a tradition that does not uphold values. It is seen as a tradition which does not hold up the real respect for the kind of issues that the Islamic religions are holding very significant to them. These positions often held by Western Christians are not held by Iraqi Christians. They're very, very different. My people say the creed and they believe it. My people live a very upright, courageous and respectful life, but that is not how things are perceived. I just had an email yesterday from some of the Christians in Baghdad saying is it true that the Church in America supports homosexuality? You see, what may happen here in a fairly benign way is seen there as being particularly offensive, and the message does get across. And so, whatever we see happening in Western society, it is seen as being Christian. I don't just mean the attitude of the Church; I mean the attitude of the whole society. One thing you've got to understand is that in Iraq, there is no separation between religion and state, religion and politics. I have been greatly pleased by the support that we have had from the command U.S. Army chaplain, who's actually a Southern Baptist. We had to dress him up as a priest and get some priest clothes made for him in Baghdad because they didn't have any - he didn't have any. But he achieved a huge amount in his work with the various religious leaders in Iraq with us, but the thing that he had to stress was that in America, there is this concept of a separation of church and state. It does not happen in Iraq. You can't separate religion from politics. Religion and politics are intrinsically linked. MR. CROMARTIE: We have time for one more question. Thank you, Canon White. Commissioner Shea. MS. SHEA: Canon White, can you give us some idea of the impact on Iraq if it is emptied and drained of all its minorities. I mean it has always been a very pluralistic society. Can you describe the future if we continue to go down this road and there's - and all these ancient people who have lived there since time immemorial are then gone, and their cultures are gone, and then their way of life and skills, and the country becomes more monolithic? CANON WHITE: I think the future's very bleak indeed. The fact is that the traditions that we have mentioned see as their foundation Iraqi society. And as my people said to me the other Sunday - the other Saturday, sorry - we have never had it so bad. Things have never been this bad since the Mongols. And we have to ensure that they remain for the continuity of an Iraqi society which is diverse.

One of the great things about Iraq and its history has been its diversity and Dr. Donny George will obviously be able to speak a lot more about the history of Iraq than I can, but it's very significant, and the Assyrian history is vital to the continuity of Iraq as we know it. Iraq as we know it is one of the most fascinating and incredible nations in the world. I was fortunate to have been there, or unfortunate to have been there before the war. I've been there for at least a decade, so I've seen the change in Iraqi society and it wasn't all good before the war either. There were major problems then, but we have to face the fact that the problems today are the greatest that we have ever seen. MR. CROMARTIE: Reverend Canon White, thank you so much for your time and for your testimony. CANON WHITE: Thank you. MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you for your good work. CANON WHITE: Thank you very much. It was good being with you. MR. CROMARTIE: We're now privileged to have Ms. Pascale Warda as our next - yeah, I think we'll have all the speakers come up together. Our first speaker is Ms. Pascale Warda who is a Chaldean-Assyrian Christian. She's former minister of migration and displacement in the Iraqi provisional government and a former human rights adviser to the government. My understanding is that you have an interpreter who will read your statement for you. Is that right? And then - we'll hear from everyone first, and then we'll have our questions from the Commissioners. Thank you so much. You might pull that microphone just a little closer to yourself there, and make sure the button is on. PASCALE WARDA (through interpreter): My name is Pascale Warda. I am an Assyrian Christian from the Chaldean Catholic Church, and I live in Baghdad, Iraq. In 2004, during the first transitional Iraqi government under Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, I held the position of Minister of Migration and Displacement. After serving the transitional government for a year, I was appointed as the human rights

adviser to the speaker of the Iraqi Parliament. I am currently serving as the president of the Iraqi Women's Center for Development, and I am also a political activist. I would like to thank our friends in the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for inviting me today to appear as a witness in order to bring attention to the reality of the situation facing religious minorities inside Iraq. I would like to begin with my own story. While serving as the minister of migration, the ministry building was targeted with bombs and since then, there have been four separate assassination attempts against my life. In 2005, during one of these attempts, the convoy carrying my bodyguards was attacked. All four of my Christian bodyguards were brutally killed. Today I will be focusing on the deteriorating conditions of the largest ethnic and religious minority of the country, the Assyrian Christians, Chaldean-Assyrians, the indigenous people of Iraq. Iraq is the home of the last concentrated pocket of Chaldean-Assyrians in the world. As a lifelong Assyrian human rights activist, I am honored to be with you today to be the voice of people who have no opportunity to speak or be heard. Today, there is a real disconnect between the authorities in Iraq and the people in Iraq. The foundation of the new political system, which was originally meant to develop into a real democratic rule of governance, is facing many challenges due to the unsustainable framework under which the current government was designed. It focused greatly on sectarian division and characteristics of the majority Sunni, Shi'a and Kurdish groups in Iraq with little regard to the rights of the religious and ethnic minority groups. This is evidenced in the current electoral laws which were embedded in 2004 by the governing council which Paul Bremer administered. This design, in turn, awarded lawmaking positions based only on their sectarian links rather than qualifications of the candidates. Iraq is a rich country, not only in natural resources, but also in human capital, and its strength lies in the diversity of its people. Satisfying the three largest groups in Iraq by guaranteeing full representation at the expense of the minorities forsakes the true values of democracy for which thousands of American and Iraqi lives were sacrificed. Since the Iraqis were freed from dictatorship by American forces, \$52 billion have been spent by the Iraqi and American administrations in Iraq, a large amount of which was spent on security. Unfortunately, the result is what we see today: a violent and unstable Iraq. Over 30 churches have been destroyed. Priests have been kidnapped, killed or beheaded, and the Christians have been systematically targeted for persecution by Islamic fundamentalists. A 14-year old boy was crucified in Basra. A one-year old baby was roasted and delivered to his mother's doorstep on a bed of rice. Just last week, a young boy was gunned down by Kurdish fighters wearing the Iraqi National Guard uniform in the Nineveh Plains. The stories are many and seemingly endless, each day bringing fresh tragedy to this helpless Christian minority. It is clear that the most vulnerable populations are minority groups and all Iraqi women who represent more than 55 percent of Iraqi society. At the beginning of the war, the Christian Chaldean-Assyrians represented five percent of Iraqi population, an estimated two million people. The continuous and systematic attacks against this minority group has forcefully displaced tens of thousands from many areas in Baghdad such as the Dora district, Baghdad Al-Jadida, Mashtal and Baqouba. These famous Christian Baghdad neighborhoods are now empty of the thousands of their Christian residents because of the fatwas issued by Islamic fundamentalists who gave them three choices: convert to Islam, pay the jiziah - Islamic protection tax imposed on non-Muslims - or leave with no personal possessions. Christian women are forced under the Islamic hijab, a practice being rejected even by a large number of Iraqi Muslim women as well. Those with limited financial ability flee to the north of Iraq for safety, but not necessarily better living conditions. The Nineveh Plain, an area with deep Christian roots and a large Christian population, cannot possibly sustain the influx of thousands of families fleeing to the north. With shortage of housing, schools, and basic infrastructure, life becomes unbearable with little hope for a better future. Those with greater financial means choose to flee outside the country. They end up in neighboring countries where their lives are on hold, living in horrid conditions with no opportunity to provide education for their children, no access to healthcare, unauthorized to work. And in some countries, they remain without any status, causing them to go into hiding for fear of immediate deportation. According to the United Nations, an estimated 40 percent of 2.2 million Iraqi refugees are Assyrian Christians. The defenseless Christians are directly targeted by the increasing violence in Iraq because they do not have militias. They are identified as American allies and infidels for the simple reason that they share a common faith with those in the Western world. The security situation is worsened for lack of any protection offered by the Iraqi local government to protect the presence of the Christians. The U.S. government must take steps in offering solutions to protect the minorities, especially in the northern region and the Nineveh Plain. Rather than fleeing to neighboring countries, the Chaldean-Assyrian and other minorities must be encouraged to stay. They need help with reconstruction and development projects in their indigenous villages, especially in those from where the Assyrians have been displaced since 1961 due to Kurdish uprising against the central government. Despite aggravating and insufferable conditions, Iraq's Christians continue to demand their safety, their right to practice their Christian faith and assert their unique indigenous ethnic identity and to participate as equals in the new Iraq. It is the moral obligation of the Iraqi and American governments to help them achieve these objectives and to ensure the protection of these vulnerable ancient communities of Iraq. Thank you.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you. Thank you very much. We'll now hear a testimony from Dr. George. Dr. George is the former chairman of the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage and former director of the Iraqi National Museum. Dr. George, thank you for joining us today.

DONNY GEORGE: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. And I would love to say that this is a real historical moment for us to be here with you and this great chance that you have given us to hear us coming from Iraq and what is happening there. My name is Donny George and I am an Assyrian Christian and all my ancestors had lived in Mesopotamia, now Iraq, from the ancient times of the Assyrians more than 5,000 years ago. I have dedicated all my life to work and serve my people and country with honor and loyalty, because this is my country. During Saddam Hussein's time, I have worked on the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage from 1976 until I left the country in 2006. Before the war of 2003, we were unofficially considered second-class citizens, simply because we were Christians and Assyrians. Saddam did big efforts to omit our identity as Christians and as Assyrians. He started a large campaign of rewriting the history of Iraq in the way he envisioned. And he started calling the ancient Assyrians as Arabs; no more Assyrians. He also set up orders that newborn children babies and children of Assyrians and Christians should not bear names of

Christians or Assyrian names, but Arab Muslim names. And all of us had really big troubles about that because our names are an important part of our identity. Although the Assyrian Christians had the highest percentage of educated people in Iraq, we had the lowest percentage of high positions in the government. And of course, for the first time in the late '70s of the last century, we had young Assyrians demanding for our political rights, they were captured, tortured, and then executed. After the Americans toppled Saddam Hussein from power in April 2003, everybody started breathing with the freedom and waiting for democracy to start. And everyone as an Iraqi should have his rights. But the infiltration of people coming from the countries surrounding Iraq made it impossible to start the real process of improving the situation in the country. Besides fighting each other, the Sunnis and Shi'as, a large campaign started against the Christians. At home, my parents' place in Dora, we started hearing that the Muslim extremists will do to the Christians exactly what they did to the Jews in 1948. This meant complete cleansing of the people from the country. And because of that, we received a letter in an envelope together with a bullet of Kalashnikov. The letter was threatening my younger son, Martin, and accusing him of cursing Islam and teasing Muslim girls and they mentioned that they suspect that his father, myself, works for the Americans. So he was ordered to write a letter of apology for them who were actually mentioning themselves as the Brigades of Martyr Zaqawi, and a fine of \$1,000 to be put in an envelope and dropped in a certain place in Dora. Otherwise, the next day, he will be kidnapped and beheaded immediately. When I heard that, I asked my elder son to get them all - my mother, my two sisters, and Martin - and bring them to our place - our flat in another part of Baghdad. And in the afternoon, I arranged for the letter and the money to be dropped for them, so that they will not come after my son. In the coming few days, I heard that the same thing had happened to 12 Christian families in the same area of Dora - same kind of letter and the same kind of accusations. They all paid and left the area, leaving everything behind - houses, properties. Now Dora is completely empty of any Christian Assyrian and almost all the churches there have been bombed and burned. After I had my family all together in our flat, I arranged to send them to Damascus, Syria to be safe from that deadly threat. On the other hand, in November 2003, I became the director general of the Iraq museums. And in August 2005, I became the chairman of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage in Iraq, after 30 years of service in all the fields of antiquities. But the problems started when the new Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities was created to control the antiquities service, literally speaking when the ministry was controlled by the people coming from the religious party controlled by al-Sadr. When the ministry people started interfering in my job in especially which they knew nothing, and then all my authorities as the chairman of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage were withdrawn by the minister himself, this meant being completely paralyzed of my duties. And finally, I was told by some people in the same ministry that the order had come from their party that Donny should not stay in his position because he is Christian. And such an important institution should not be headed by a Christian. When I learned all that, I decided to quit my job and to apply for retirement. When I sent my request to the minister, in two hours, I received the answer that he had signed my request and approved it. For me, this meant clearly that he was waiting for that letter and never asked anything about it. After one week, I managed to arrange everything and traveled to Damascus with my wife and my daughter whom we were the last three of the family to leave. In Damascus, we stayed for four months during which I was offered a chance of a visiting professor in the State University of New York at Stony Brook. But I still have my mother and my two sisters in Damascus. What had happened to me and my family in Iraq is the story of every single Assyrian Christian family there, or sometimes even worse than that. They have been kidnapped, killed, executed, raped. It is an ongoing tragedy and genocide for the Assyrian Christian people in Iraq. And now, the only place these families can go, depending on their abilities, is either going up to the north in Nineveh Plain, or for those who have better chance, to move outside the country to Syria and Jordan. Now, why going to the Nineveh Plain? Historically speaking, the Assyrians belong to this Nineveh Plain. We come originally from there. In the books of history and archaeology, it is called the Assyrian triangle. Our ancient major cities are there - Nineveh, Nimrud, Khorsabad, and even the city of Ashur. Our original towns and villages are there too. We have come down from these towns and villages into the major cities of Iraq - Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, and Basra. And it is just natural, when we feel in danger, we would go back to our original area. Another important historical fact is that the Assyrians are the first people that converted to Christianity in the beginning of the first century A.D. by the hands of St. Thomas, simply because they were civilized, educated people, so they understood Christianity immediately. And now, these people are rewarded for that by persecution, kidnapping, raping, and killing. Again, in the history, the Christians being the elite people during the Abbasid Caliphate period around 1,000 years ago played a vital role in being the moderators by presenting the European culture to the Arabs and vice-versa. And they have been doing the same role during the modern history of Iraq, and again since 2003. And now, what's needed from the U.S. government? We need four essential steps to keep the remaining minority in Iraq, and possible draw these who have left to return, maybe. These four points are, one, push forward funds for internally displaced persons in the north. House of Representatives has passed 10 million (dollars) of funds; no action yet by Senate. Two, press in a sustained and determined effort the Kurdish regional government to end all practices that marginalize and discriminate against Christian and non-Kurds. Three, provide on an urgent basis, minimal infrastructure and amenities to Nineveh Plain to allow the smallest minorities to support themselves in their ancestral areas. Four, convene the civic representatives of the Iraqi minorities communities to forge a consensus regarding the political status of the Nineveh Plain territory, for example, by forming an autonomous administration district, as provided for in Article 125 of the Iraqi constitution. Thank you very much. MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you, Dr. George. Our next witness is Mr. Michael Youash. And he's the project director of the Iraqi Sustainable Democracy Project, which is an institution dedicated to examining the situation of Iraq's most vulnerable minorities. Thank you, sir, for coming. MICHAEL YOUASH: Thank you. I would like to thank the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for distinguishing itself yet again on the subject of religious minorities in Iraq. My mandate at this hearing is to draw attention to the plight of Iraq's Christian, Assyrian, Chaldean, Syriac - herein known as Chaldean-Assyrian peoples in northern Iraq and KRG - Kurdistan Regional Government-controlled areas - and also to provide solutions. It is impossible to begin without first stating

categorically our sincere thanks for the sacrifices of this nation liberating Iraq and providing us with dreams of better days. Our dreams for the future were based on statements such as those of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on August 20, 2005 at American University in Cairo. She told us then, we should all look to a future when every government respects the will of its citizens, because the ideal of democracy is universal. For 60 years, my country, the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East, and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people. To date, the Secretary of State's commitment is proving to be empty. The crisis facing this community cannot be ignored because of the conflict between Sunni and Shi'a Arabs in Iraq. Whether there is a resolution to that struggle or not, the Iraqi Christian tragedy can be confronted and dealt with successfully today. I'm falling into the part of my presentation of giving examples indicative of trends in the north and KRG-controlled areas. In January 2005, the Nineveh Plain area, a region with the highest concentration of minorities of antiquity, such as Chaldean Assyrians, Shabaks, and Yazidis, was disenfranchised. A major of the United States Army described the disenfranchisement and voter fraud with major media sources. He confirmed that the Kurdistan Democratic Party peshmerga denied the region ballot boxes. In the one area where the U.S. could somehow manage to fly in ballot boxes, Bashira, the KDP peshmerga entered the town, confiscated the boxes, and returned them full at the end of the day. This was a formative experience for Iraq's Christians, particularly those of the Nineveh Plain. The denial of such a fundamental right left the community entirely scarred. The Nineveh Plain and areas within the KRG's jurisdiction are also suffering from economic discrimination and suffocation in terms of reconstruction and development, which further fuels what we are calling soft ethnic cleansing. The funding that does arrive to our towns and villages comes with political conditionalities. The clearest condition is that beneficiaries must become supporters of the ruling KDP party. Indeed, even gainful employment comes with a precondition that one become a member of the KDP. On the issue of economic discrimination based on employment opportunities, the Christian Chaldean Assyrians going north are confronting the reality of forced membership as a prerequisite. This is crushing their hope that things can get better as they flee one dictatorship only to arrive to another. Tangible differences in the structures - housing structures built for Chaldean Assyrians, where they do have homes rebuilt for them, and those built for their Kurdish neighbors is telling. The basic housing structures built for Chaldean Assyrians in contrast to the more durable and generous villages built for Kurdish towns is a stark reminder of second-class citizenship. Arbitrary arrests, summary judgments, and punishments are also widespread. One instance is revealing. Again, I'm talking about trends. These are well documented. KDP members attempted to illegally take possession of a house in the Nineveh Plain belonging to a man who was not present. The man's neighbors, two brothers, prevented the illegal property seizure. Later that night, Iraqi military, wearing the flag of the KRG on their uniforms, entered the home of the two brothers and summarily arrested one. He was accused of being a terrorist. His brother and mother came to the holding facility. The two brothers, Chaldean Assyrians, were viciously physically beaten and jailed. Only when they renounced their actions were they released. The home of their neighbor in the Nineveh Plain was successfully occupied by the KDP. Crimes committed with impunity are the most direct actions exposing the program of soft ethnic cleansing by KRG authorities. This includes murder and the terrorizing of Christian Chaldean Assyrian communities in the Nineveh Plain. On July 17th, eight days ago, Fadi Nizar Habash, a teenager, was driving his tractor when he was struck by a hail of bullets from peshmerga in Iraqi military uniform. He had pulled the tractor to the side of the road when he saw the peshmerga vehicle coming. The peshmerga had the benefit of daylight and knew this was no threat; it's an agricultural community. Most telling is that despite wearing Iraqi military uniforms, a delegation from the KDP came to the family to express their regret at the murder of their son. The message, repeated on July 17th of this year, is that the murder of Christian Chaldean Assyrians can be done with impunity in the north. Land theft, illegal land seizures, and the KRG's unwillingness to provide sufficient redress is perhaps one of the most single pressing issues at this time. Indeed, in some cases, very well placed networks within the KDP are behind the seizure of Christian lands. From Dere, Coumaneh, Maristek, to Chembre Bethke, to Sarsink, to Chaqala Latheh and Chaqala Khatheh, we are seeing concrete examples of systematic illegal land seizures and land invasions. The closest Kurdish town to Chak Allah Tatha is Barifkeh. As early as 1993, a land restitution committee, which included Kurdish authorities, indicated that upwards of one kilometer of Chak Allah Tatha's land had been invaded. Just over one decade later, when our team arrived to assess the situation, a larger segment of that farmland - of the farmland of Chak Allah Tatha was seized, and land directly within the destroyed village. It was destroyed during the Anfal by Saddam. Chak Allah Tatha has yet to be rebuilt, while towns such as neighboring Barifke have been completely redeveloped. Land seizures such as those perpetrated in Chak Allah Tatha represent the dislocation of our people from their lands, the denial of their right to earn a livelihood, and the theft of a chance at realizing their potential. This is a direct effort at soft ethnic cleansing. The solutions to the crisis facing Iraq's Christian Chaldean Assyrians are, thankfully, quite simple. And I think you'll hear a lot of commonality in our statements on these solutions. They are feasible and realistic; they can be done immediately; and we cannot wait. Material support for internally displaced families numbering the tens of thousands who flee to the north, the Nineveh Plain, and surrounding areas is vital. A major step was taken in this respect in the House of Representatives on June 12th, 2007: \$10 million had been requested for getting essential aid to religious minority IDPs fleeing to the Nineveh Plain. At the minimum, this must be approved in the Senate. It must be followed by other similar allocations in funding in meeting the ever-increasing number of IDPs arriving in the Nineveh Plain. The United States Government must press the KRG in a sustained and determined manner to end practices that are marginalizing our people and discriminate against them and other minorities, as Dr. Donny George also indicated. They must provide on an urgent basis the minimal infrastructure and amenities to the Nineveh Plain to allow the smallest minorities to sustain themselves in their ancestral areas. This must include the building of homes, schools, and clinics. It requires developing road, electrical, sewage, and water infrastructure. The United States government must stop the effort by the KRG to expand its existing borders to include the Nineveh Plain. The attempts at expanding the KRG into the Nineveh Plain is outlined in the KRG's draft constitution, Article II, Section I. This fundamentally destabilizing agenda is prejudicial to the

survival of the Christian Chaldean Assyrians and other religious minorities that constitute the majority of the Nineveh Plain. It is denying them a chance to determine their own future and they cannot be denied such a fundamental right. The U.S. must convene civic representatives of the Iraqi minority communities to forge a consensus regarding the political status of the Nineveh Plain Territory, for example, by forming an autonomous administrative district as provided for in Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution. I'd like to remind the Commission that the United States Government has a moral obligation and responsibility to facilitate and drive such an agenda. There are also extensive examples of this activity by the United States government. It brought together and almost forced reconciliation between major warring Kurdish factions. In 2002, the United States government brought together the Iraq opposition groups. It formed the interim governing council after the removal of Saddam. Let's call it the first successful eight months, the only successful eight months that we had. That's the end of my formal presentation. But I'd like to conclude - I depart from my script on one point. And that is to say that in my last trip to Iraq, I had the benefit of celebrating as an ethnic Assyrian, Kha B'Nissan on our ethnic new year. It was the calendar year 6756. It's now 6757. The amount of time that I've been outside of Iraq - I'm born in the Diaspora; I'm the progeny of Iraqi refugee Chaldean Assyrians from previous persecution - that is a blip, the 30 years that I've been out of my homeland. I'd like to go back and this is what this effort is about. MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you. Thank you very much. We'll now hear from Dr. Nashi who was born in Baghdad. He is now a pediatrician in Morristown, New Jersey. Thank you, sir, for coming. SUHAIB NASHI: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Commissioner, for giving this opportunity to the Mandaean to be heard. MR. CROMARTIE: Why don't you just pull that microphone over to you a little bit so you don't have to lean into it? DR. NASHI: Well, the Sabean Mandaean religion is one of the oldest monotheistic religion groups in the Middle East, living mainly in southern Iraq and some parts of Iran. The religion is independent of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It follows the teaching of John the Baptist, and baptism is being its central ritual. Like most religions, it emphasizes marriage, family, and peaceful coexistence with other groups. It believes total equality between man and woman, and has a pacifist doctrine; carrying any weapon is a major sin in Mandaeanism. The main self-defense tools are knowledge, dialogue, and escape. Mandaeanism historically were either professionals or jewelers. Although there are no accurate statistics, we think the Mandaean around the world now are about 50-60,000. During the past decades, and especially in the past four years, thousands have escaped Iraq, choosing self-exile over persecution and death. And until early 2003, there were about 25-30,000 in Iraq; currently less than 5,000 remain in that country. A majority of the community is now seeking refuge in Syria, Jordan, and Yemen - 2,000 families, 650 families, and 50, respectively. The Sabean Mandaean lived in Mesopotamia for more than 2,000 years. Their main dilemma was they were never mentioned. And even when they were mentioned three times in the Koran, they were never recognized as people of the Book, and they were always considered infidels in different Islamic schools of thought. Their fate was always at the mercy of the local clergy and the local rulers. During this journey in history, Mandaean have faced several massacres for trivial reasons, and thus mentioned in my testimony. After the First World War, Arab nationalism took precedent over religion, and the ethnic identity of minorities in the Arab Islamic world had to dissolve in the pan-Arabic identity. This included all minorities. The Mandaean lost their language, their Mandaean Aramaic, distinctive dress, and heritage to the Arabic culture. During the Ba'ath and Saddam era, the Mandaean took their share of misery and pain, and the suffering that occurred. Hundreds of their young men and women were killed, condemned to horrible tortures, or simply vanished for trivial reasons. Hundreds more were killed during the Iraq-Iran war under the forced drafting rules. Their status as conscientious objectors, and their doctrine that prohibit carrying guns for any reason, were never recognized. That took a substantial portion of young males. With the loss of the security and the rise of the extreme Islamic ideology, the situation of Mandaean is deteriorating by the day. Chaos and civil war are on the horizon. The sectarian identity among Iraqis have preceded the national identity, and violence is increasing in scope and lethality. Sunni and Shi'a death squads are roaming the streets. These death squads kill people according to their last names and religious affiliations. Mandaean are targeted by both sides. More than 120 Mandaean were killed recently since the fall of Saddam, and numbers are increasing rapidly. Two of our religious men were killed, al Haladi al Allah Mutafala el Rafmani killed on 10/10/2006, al Suara south of Baghdad, gunned at his own home in front of his family. The family was ordered to leave immediately. And al Haladi Talib Sulaman Zuhiri was killed at his doorstep in December 2nd, 2006 in Ur District. Recent incidents - a bus carrying engineers going to Al Iskandariyah factory was struck by Shi'a extremists. All Sunni were taken to the side and a Mandaean engineer was with them. They were killed immediately. In another incident at a similar time, a car that was carrying a Mandaean family, among others, was stopped on the road to Syria by Sunni insurgents. All Shi'a were taken aside; the Mandaean family including a six-year old were taken aside. They were all killed on the roadside. Forced conversion is happening in an alarming degree. Boys are being kidnapped, forcibly circumcised - a major sin in the Mandaean religion - and forcibly converted to Islam. Young girls has been kidnapped, raped, forced to marry Muslims. Family receives threats demanding that they either pay jiziah ransom or leave the area. In one a recent incident, a young Mandaean man was stopped while trying to escape to Syria. He was asked about his identity. And when it was known that he was a Mandaean, he was taken to a nearby local prison. He was beaten, tortured, and was asked to convert or be killed. He converted. However, the gang asked him to prove it by killing a Shi'a prisoner. He refused and started crying. And the gang then cut his genitalia and threw him near a highway. And he was saved by a passing car. Confiscation of property is becoming a common unpunished practice. Mandaean houses are being taken in different areas. Often, police and neighbors are unwilling to provide any assistance. Hundreds of houses have been taken. And a family living in al Dimiyah district since 1956 got a knock on their door and was told to leave the house next day or be killed. They left to a relative's house. Their house was taken the same day by armed people. They informed the police. The police called them next day and told them that they were liars because the people in that house were living there for more than 20 years. A day later, they got a phone call on the same phone calling them to leave that location or be killed. And they left to Syria immediately. In the last week alone, several Mandaean families in Baghdad were given one hour notice to leave the house or be killed, and they had to leave with nothing. This ethnic

cleansing has resulted in cleaning a lot of Baghdad areas from Mandaeans and other minorities. In other cities of Iraq, the situation is not better. On last Sunday, July 21st, 2007, the Mandaean Baptist place, or church in Omara was machine gunned, and three baptizers there were injured. The prayer place in Basra was attacked by guns in June 29th of 2006. Looting, kidnapping, rapes, and threats of harm or pay money is a common practice in Iraq, affects a wide sector of Iraqis. However, minorities are suffering the most. The gang usually attacks the weakest links in the community. And with a religious cover for their deeds, they are fighting the infidels. Mandaeans being the jewelers and the middle class professionals, yet carry no guns, became the easy target. Hundreds of incidents - looting, kidnapping, rape, and threats were recorded in the human rights report in your hands. The story of a 20-year old, Rana Zuhaidi who went to college on February 26th, 2007, to get her graduation degree, and the last voice her mother heard was her crying over the cell phone to save her, stands up for all human conscious to save our young from the awful future they are facing. Her father was killed a year ago. The Mandaeans have tried to express their concerns through the political process in Iraq. However, contacts with officials, religious leaders, and political party leaders usually end up in empty promises. The police force is corrupt, often helps attackers, and has little or no role in protecting minorities. The Mandaean situation is different from other minorities as they do not have an identified geographical area inside Iraq as their safe haven. They have no choice but to leave the country, seeking refuge. We do not even exist in the Nineveh Plains, and we will not benefit from the 10 million (dollars) that the American government or Congress has allocated for the Mandaeans. More than 85 percent of the Mandaean community has been displaced from Iraq to Syria and Jordan. The Mandaean community has dwindled to less than 5,000 today and even less. The Mandaeans who are unable to leave Iraq are currently moving to different cities inside the country and gathering for protection, but have little hope to survive this storm in their history. We have only five priests left in Iraq from the 20 we have all over the world. The situation in Syria and Jordan is dire for refugees. These countries are neither ready nor able to help thousands of refugees and a humanitarian disaster is imminent. Refugee seekers are denied work, education, healthcare, and most of all protection from abuses. Children are pushed into illegal child labor. Some girls are being lured into sex trade, and some are kidnapped and married by sex traders to be sold in other countries. We ask for the following: (that) the United States government act immediately to prevent the humanitarian disaster in the making. The U.S.A. government should take a leading role to step up and save the Mandaeans and other minorities inside Iraq. We ask for the Department of State and Homeland Security to create specific guidelines that recognize that Mandaeans will in all likelihood not be safe from persecution in Iraq, and should be therefore provide Mandaean with a permanent protection by accepting them for resettlement with different priorities, one or two, similar to the Iranian mandates; that the U.S. government expands the number of Iraq refugees accepted to a much higher number, and that special consideration is given to the Mandaeans and other vulnerable groups of minorities; that the State Department allow United States Mandaeans who have relatives seeking asylum in Syria and Jordan to be able to sponsor those refugees to the United States; and that the United States government should allocate funding and encourage other governments, especially the Iraqi government, to do the same for programs to provide the Iraqi refugees with necessary means for safe and secure living on an urgent basis. And thank you very much. MR.

CROMARTIE: Thank you. Let me just say before we go to questions that we had a representative from the Yazidi community that was going to testify today, but unfortunately was not able to join us this morning, and we look forward to having him back possibly at our next hearing. But thank each of you for your comments. And we have some questions for you. But the first question is from Commissioner Felice Gaer, who had to leave to go back to New York, and she asked that I would ask it for her, and I'm glad to do so. This is for Pascale Warda. Felice Gaer says that she has been involved in human rights defense activity for more than 25 years and she's heard testimony about atrocities beyond human imagination. But she's never before heard of something as cynical and bestial as the one you described. And I quote what you said, a one-year old baby was roasted and delivered to her mother's doorstep on a bed of rice. Could you tell us more details about this - where, when, who, and whether the perpetrators of this are known? Can you help to shine a spotlight on this by providing any documentation of this atrocity? And if there is any information at all on what, if anything, the governmental authorities have done in response to this atrocity? Was there an investigation? Was anyone held responsible? MS. WARDA: Concerning my attacks, attacks against me? MR. CROMARTIE: No, not against you. One of the evidence that you gave - MS. WARDA: Yeah. I'm sorry. I didn't prefer to read my speech. Always I speak, but I would like to respond to you. I have a report. Unfortunately, I didn't have time, because I arrived yesterday, before yesterday, very late. I didn't have time to print this report from Hammurabi, a human rights organization in Baghdad who gather all these cases one by one and publish it for a call of protection. So these cases are daily cases in Baghdad, unfortunately, and I am contacted by many, many of our people. And nearly all the cases in al Dora and in Nineveh Plain, I was in the north, even this case we didn't mention it. I don't know why I forgot that. In the village very near to my village called Dehi, another children was kidnapped and just a message for his father. You must give us, I don't know how many, \$7,000 or seven packets. It means, each packet is \$10,000 - seven packets - they speak about packets not dollars. So give us the seven packets to deliver or your children die. So we don't know who. This is in the north, so I was there, 10 minutes from the village. I would like to know who were. I don't know. We don't know. Just we know the parents who came and contact us. Please do something while we can find any trust for these people where they were kidnapped. So it's the same thing in Nineveh Plain last two weeks. We had those teenagers killed, one after the other. Michael was mentioning one of them. And in Basra, it's like, you know, the situation is continued instability for Christians. They leave Basra. Basra is empty of Christians and Dora is empty of Christians now, because of those actions. And my bodyguard chief, his brother was killed by mistake. An American killed him because he was out when it was not allowed to be out. And when they were - during the condolence, the house was completely occupied by terrorists and put everybody out. And family came to me, what we can do? Can you do something for us? All the day, I am receiving such a situation. So we cannot say where exactly, because they kidnap people and then go. And we have many, many witnesses of people who gave as witnesses. MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you very much. The report that you referred to, can you get us a copy of that so the

Commission can?MS. WARDA: Yes, yes, I will do it, yes.MR. CROMARTIE: Yeah, we'd like very much to see that report.MS. WARDA: No problem. I have it in Arabic and English.MR. CROMARTIE: Excellent, thank you. I have a question for the whole panel then, if I could. And that is, do you feel that your communities are targeted for persecution, or are you caught up in a broader pattern of violence with the war in Iraq? Are you the victims of being in the midst of a real war - or maybe it could be both - but I'm wondering what your thoughts are on that. Yes, sir, Dr. George?DR. GEORGE: Christian Assyrians, among the Iraqis, I believe we have never mentioned the incidents that happened to them among the Iraqis here and there. There have been killings through a lot of incidents. But, we have been mentioning the ones where Christians have been targeted.And to tell you specifically, these things have been raised up, and became more larger after the comments of the pope about this stuff. They became larger and expanded so much, and in some instances, they have been saying let the pope come and save you. So they are really targeted as Christians, mainly as Christians. This is what's happening.MR. CROMARTIE: Please, wait for the mic if you could.MR. NASHI: Definitely, we feel it's both ways. I mean, we are part of the Iraqi population and we are being targeted by bombs and things. But at the same time, they are targeting. When you attack a Mandaean or you attack a church, that is specific attack. And most of the attacks we mentioned now are reported in Human Rights. But we're actually not counting the dead that happened from an accidental bombing or something. It is targeted for people who are infidels, who are helping the invaders, or even if you are a looter, you choose to attack a Mandaean or a Christian because you - the money of the infidel is free for you and that's a doctrine.MR. CROMARTIE: Yes, Michael?MR. YOUASH: I'd actually like to - as someone who ostensibly heads up, aside from being an activist, a policy institute - and we engage with all arms of government, providing research and analysis. I'd like to respond to you as a way of responding to the Department of State's regular categorization that, well, this is just a wider conflict. And I'd like to call the wider conflict argument the myth of equality in victimization. And that is exactly what it is; it's a myth of equality in victimization. It's borne out by the numbers that Congresswoman Anna Eshoo cited that we are disproportionately - all these minorities are massively, disproportionately represented in the refugee and internal displaced Diaspora.But on a technical level, on a policy level, I can tell you, attacks against these minorities - for example, Christian ChaldeanAssyrians - they don't control any political turf in Iraq. They don't control a sizeable resource base that makes them a weighty factor needing to be eliminated. Therefore, the attacks are purely vindictive, purely malicious, meant to send messages. They have no deterrent capacity.Our organization went out with the Chaldean Assyrian Syriac Council of America on a field mission to Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. And the common theme from refugees that had left is that Americans won't protect us; we're not allowed to form our own local policing forces; we're not allowed to become even part of formal security structures to protect our communities. So they have no deterrent capacity. What they put to us bluntly is, for a Sunni Arab sitting in a Sunni neighborhood, they know that for a Shi'a to attack them, the Shi'a faces a consequence. But an attack on a Mandaean, a Yazidi, a Christian ChaldeanAssyrian, and other minorities comes without any consequences.MR. CROMARTIE: Are these attacks by non-state actors?MR. YOUASH: That is - I would leave it to -MR. CROMARTIE: What do you say, Dr. George?DR. GEORGE: Well, yes, but one thing I would like to mention, it's not a complete attack from all the Arabs, from all the Muslims. We do have very good friends. But even them, they are afraid of supporting the Christians, because it is -MR. CROMARTIE: Did you say afraid?DR. GEORGE: It is afraid from this kind of - if I may call them Muslim criminals, they call themselves. And they are targeting; they are doing all this. And of course, there is no support for these minorities from the government. Nothing is happening.MR. CROMARTIE: Say that last sentence again, I'm sorry.DR. GEORGE: Nothing is happening, I mean, from the official authorities to protect these. Nothing is happening. All these bombings of the churches - nobody could stop them. I mean, the church, St. George's Church in Dora that I married in and I have baptized my three children there, it was bombed. And during daytime, they came again and took the cross and put it down and burned the church again.MR. CROMARTIE: They was who?DR. GEORGE: This kind of Muslim criminals. They mainly refer to themselves as the al Qaeda people, the Sunnis' al Qaeda. But not only them, but even the Shiite militias are doing the same as everybody.MR. CROMARTIE: Yes, ma'am?MS. WARDA: I think when we see such a situation concerning people and the incapability of government to do something, we would like to ask till when, till when government have no decision, have no capability, have no ability to do something? I was speaking with Dr. Abdul Al Mahdi last week, and I said, please, do you know what's happening outside the congress? He said, yes, I know, but what I can do.MR. CROMARTIE: Who were you speaking to, again, please?MS. WARDA: The vice president of the republic, Adil Abdul Al Mahdi. I said, why you would like not to choose to recognize that it is impossible for you to do something? Yeah, we recognize what you can do is our destiny, all. It's right. All people are targeted. Muslims are targeted. Everyone is target in Iraq. But you see such a fact for Iraqi Christians, for Mandaean, for Yazidi, they are specifically targeted in everything. And last week, I was receiving people always saying that we must pay jiziah each month. We must pay because we protect you. Where? Which protection? Even if you protect us - if you protect us, we can pay - no problem. But you don't protect us; you kill us, and you take jiziah. So when we speak about this to government or to American as well, what we can do? Who can do that?You see, this is the mystery we didn't understand. Why it's happening in this way? I am in very close contact with all government membership, but it's really a situation which is unable to be resolved in this way. Why? I am asking really to bring other solutions, to bring other initiatives, I don't know.MR. CROMARTIE: Are there any communities - is there any place in Iraq where your communities are safe?MS. WARDA: Sorry?MR. CROMARTIE: Are there any places in Iraq where your communities are safe?MS. WARDA: I think, no. I think we must be realistic. Baghdad, Baqubah, Kirkuk, Tal Afar, also still, Mosul, somewhere in Basra, not all Basra, are really in fire, and more and more impossible to really move. From Baghdad to Kirkuk is impossible to move. Last week, I was obliged to don't bring my bodyguards and to arrange other things in the north, because I can't get my bodyguards to be killed again. Because in Hamrin, where terrorists flee from Khallahs and Hibhib, they go to Hamrin. And there, they take people, and particularly Christians were all the week targeted. Maybe 100 persons were kidnapped. And we don't know if they are released now. I am here; I don't know their last news. So it's a

situation, which is in progress - and bad progress and negative progress - and nobody can really control. This is very dangerous. MR. CROMARTIE: Dr. Nashi? DR. NASHI: I mean, if we look at the policies of the insurgency, we can understand, are they targeting minorities or not. When they bomb a market or innocent people is going and bystanders, there is a definite political statement there. We want to disturb the situation. We want to discredit every sort of democracy or safety that United States or whoever looking for democracy in that country is bringing. In addition to that, there is a political agenda from the insurgency really to hit on minorities. That is part of the same issue that they will kill innocent people and kill minorities and kill. They want to discredit that issue of democracy or a colorful Iraq or in any way to have a future, democratic Iraq based on other than America is out; West is out; and we will do what we want to do in that country. And that is a policy statement for them. For us, there is no place in Iraq that is safe. I mean, we are now becoming very small and most of our community is out, and most of the other people are really joined in very small groups and they are very frightened. MR. CROMARTIE: Michael? MR. YOUASH: I think your question was answered in some of the testimony, which is directly yes. The Nineveh Plains, surrounding areas in the north are an area of safety. The question is for how long? And that is why we say - and I think it's a recurring theme - must act now; we must act today; and that these are feasible things. The creation of some kind of administrative area, administrative district of the Nineveh Plain, surrounding areas, is constitutional. It's part of the Iraqi constitution, article 125. There is groups on the ground trying to pursue it. We need to find creative ways of supporting them, working with them, assisting them. But there is a window of opportunity. The very same area is not allowed right now to have a formal local police force. We need to look at why that is happening. The U.S. military can still help make that happen. Local policing, that's all. Things like that, these are feasible, practical measures. So - MR. CROMARTIE: Commissioner Shea? MS. SHEA: We have heard from your panel about - and the previous panel - the acute crisis that is racking communities, the minority communities in Iraq today, shocking brutality, and we have heard you attest to the fact that you are - that your communities and the Yazidi community and the Jewish community and others are being singled out in a special way because of your religious identity. Dr. Nashi talked about people being hunted down because of their last names, and you all spoke about that this is not a political statement, it's really very a personal sectarian statement. And Dr. Nashi, I understand that you're looking towards refugee help at this time for the Mandaeans, that there's 5,000 left inside Iraq, that it's really dwindled down to a statistical insignificance. We are going to be holding a hearing in September just on this refugee question on Iraq, so we will pursue that some more. Regarding finding solutions for the others, and Reverend Canon White spoke about the Jewish community, and maybe we can do something to push the Holland situation to accept these remnants of the Jewish community which was once so robust in Iraq. Regarding the ChaldoAssyrians, it seems like you've made a case that if they were to go north, 40 percent, according to UNHCR, have already left the country. Maybe some of them would come back if they felt that there was a safe place for them to go, and then there are tens of millions of others who are now - or tens of thousands, sorry, tens of thousands of others who have gravitated to the north seeking refuge. And that might be a way to keep this community inside the country to preserve it for better times, and not as a ghetto or concentration camp or even a refugee camp situation but as a place to go back to their ancestral lands where they could really establish themselves and sustain themselves there. Now, there was a hearing in Congress this spring, and Congresswoman Watson expressed concern for these minorities, and she probed the witness, who was Stuart Bowen, the State Department's Inspector General for Iraq, this was in the spring, and she was trying to probe, that she had heard these reports of the refugees, the disproportionate numbers, and she was probing about whether our policies are pushing Christians and other minorities out of Iraq, where they have lived for centuries, and what are we doing to ensure that, she asked, that we use our funds as we go through reconstruction to ensure that all various ethnic groups can enjoy the benefits of this new democracy. And I was really stunned because of the response of the State Department. This Inspector General for Iraq, Stuart Bowen, gave an answer, and I'd really like to ask Dr. Warda and Dr. George about it, since you just came from Iraq, Dr. Warda and Dr. George, you just came a few months ago, what your response is to this. And Mr. Bowen from the State Department says that it's funny that she should ask this question about the Christians - yesterday I had a phone call from a representative of the Assyrian Christians, and he actually was optimistic about progress he was making in talks with Prime Minister Maliki about creating a Nineveh Province. And then he doesn't answer any other questions about what policies may be crafted just for the protection of these smallest minorities. He basically deflects that question by saying that he's heard optimistic progress. Can you respond to that? Is there a Nineveh Province? Is there progress being made for that? MS. WARDA: I think some ideas I would like to clarify about this issue is Nineveh Plain and Kurdistan area, north of Iraq. Those people are coming to their own lands and not refugee anywhere. This people are all people who were displaced in 1961 until 1991. So they were in Baghdad, in Mosul, in Basra, anywhere. Now they are redisplaced, so they prefer to go and to be in their own lands because our proprietor of hectors and hectors of lands leave because of Kurdish revolution. So in the north, now, I was very happy to be there some days ago because a new movement, very little new movement of reconstruction is pushed by America and is paid by America and is very good state. But for all this number of people who are coming from everywhere and all those who are in Syria and Jordan and so on would like to come back if any project is really encouraged in the region. Those villages are empty because of the situations since one cycle. Since Iraqi state creation, we are in (?) the situation, so people are going back to their lands. What is requested is to help them to establish themselves and this land, which is not foreign land for them, which is not refugee land, is their own land. In Nineveh Plain, I think, as vast area we have there and as very far away in the history, we do exist with other minorities, of course, in Nineveh Plain, but most of the presence was from our community, ChaldoAssyrian, Assyrian community. I think it's very logic to push the help and the reconstruction projects in this area as a solution inside the country. We need to be inside the country to impose our respect, firstly, because I was also in Jordan one month ago. I don't like to even hear what people say because it's so hard for me. People are living in very bad situation in Syria, in Jordan, et cetera. So it's, I think one of the solutions is to say yes for any organization and administrative area for those people to be protected, to be executor for themselves. MS.

SHEA: And is there good progress in this - (off mike)?MS. WARDA: I didn't see, really, any progress than - (unintelligible) - progress. I was with many of Iraqi politician. I never hear one of them speaking about the question. I was speaking about it, and many were saying, yeah, you also like others, you would like to divide Iraq. I said, no, this is not dividing Iraq, this is just to impose our respect in our lands where we come from. So it's, I think it's a question which is not really understood yet not just by Iraqis but by Americans also. It's not understood that this people must regain their lands, which were empty of them.(Off mike.)MR. CROMARTIE: Dr. George, and then -DR. GEORGE: Yeah, again, I would like to emphasize, I don't know this kind of information that al Maliki, Prime Minister al Maliki, had said that. We never heard about this information, but again, I would like to emphasize that the Assyrians, ChaldoAssyrians, this is their place, of historical place, and a safe place for them. Yes, we are Iraqis, and why not - the Kurds had their autonomy, according to the constitution. The Shi'as are seeking autonomy according to the constitution. Why not the Christian Assyrians have their autonomy in their own lands in their historical lands to have autonomy, but to be, still be a part of the texture of the Iraqi people? That's the main thing.DR. NASHI: I just want to add about the Mandaean. Although they're the 5,000 remaining, I think most of them actually are more attached to the Tigris and Euphrates and their land, and they are ready to die without leaving the country because they know the refugee status outside is more harmful or more painful for them, and that's why, when I'm talking about the statistical significance of them, but they do want to stay, and I'm helping them as number one, yes, there is a huge refugee status crisis for them in neighboring countries, which is threatening the infrastructure of the community very, very deeply, and that's what's happening in Syria and Jordan, but the 5,000 remaining, they want to remain. They don't want to leave, and I feel obliged to help them as much as I can.MR. CROMARTIE: Commissioner Eid? There you go, to the mike, yeah, pull the microphone up.IMAM TALAL Y. EID: Thanks for having the courage to voice your concern. I do hear your voice, and I value your presence. As a Commissioner and an American imam, I do value pluralistic societies, and I do believe that Christian and Jewish groups are assets to Iraq, and I do believe that in order, or that government support is important in order for a minority to survive. For example, I do remember the tragedy of September 11 and how the Muslim community in the United States here suffered persecution, or it was the beginning of that, and I remember that the fifth day, how President Bush visited the Islamic Center and gave support to the Muslims, so I would say that the Iraqi government is greatly responsible to give support to all minorities. You know, Reverend White, he indicated that there is a theory, support in theory, but in practice, I believe that the Iraqi government should raise your issue, that you are more vulnerable to threats, more than any other community, and this is the least thing that the Iraqi government should do.Now, of course, what I heard today is that - I heard the voice for increasing security for the minorities, for the groups that we heard from today. Extend the war, increasing security may not be enough, really, to solve your problems, and the issue of having autonomy and having militias may not be helpful that much to your situation, but I'm sure that the Commissioners here will be able to take your voice and communicate it with the government and hopefully something will happen. But in the meanwhile, what I need from you, and if you can respond to that, that concrete plan is very important because you do not live in one area. If you live in one area, then I would say, I would ask my government to provide full security to this area. But you live at different areas, which may make the job of the American government more difficult to provide more security. I would appreciate if you can come up with a concrete plan of how the American government, how can the American government support or give you the support you want in order to survive? Thank you.MR. CROMARTIE: Who wants to go first? (Off mike.)MR. YOUASH: Thank you. It's a huge question, and you're right, we are not concentrated in only one area. However, with all due respect, the kind of thematic grouping I put that kind of question is, well we can't solve certain problems today because we're trying to solve the big problem of tomorrow. But these, the theme has been the problems of today that are solvable, that are doable, that can make an immediate difference. So you are absolutely right. Iraq, and as Canon White mentioned, Iraq deep-seated problems that were unleashed, maybe unforeseen, some people did raise flags, but were unleashed, and we are trying to come to grips with those problems. But we're saying, do not put off what you can do today that can have an immediate impact because of those problems. Do not hold those solutions today that are feasible hostage to the larger conflagration that we may not be able to cope with.And so what you have heard today, what I would argue, is the concrete steps that are doable. The Nineveh Plain is doable. Reconstruction in the Nineveh Plain, this is, as one person, as several American legislators have said, the greatest irony of the whole thing is we're actually on the ground. We're actually on the ground. Even when I head up field missions to the Nineveh Plain, I do require some security, but I can go over to the PRT and meet with them and discuss what the issues are. They get onto the ground in the Nineveh Plain as well. You are on the ground and able to engage with the KRG in Erbil, with the government in Baghdad. These are doable, feasible solutions. The creation of a local police force, by the way, I would emphasize, is not a militia. That is not what we are talking about, again, with all due respect. This is an American agenda and an Iraqi agenda, to create local policing, the transfer of security. We don't know why, in areas where minorities, not just Christian ChaldoAssyrians, Shabaks and Yazidis and others are collectively as what we call Iraq's real minorities, denied the ability to create local policing units drawn from the communities, that Iraqis and Americans can trust to police their local areas, not militias. These are the feasible agendas that have been put before you, and I would ask that they be recognized as such. Do not hold what can be done today hostage because of the bigger problems that have been unleashed, not when things are feasible, not when we still have an opportunity to act.DR. NASHI: Thank you, sir. I think your question is solving the whole problem of the area, which is, I think - I think we have to think in a way that there are certain immediate needs and there are long-term solutions. The long-term solutions, you know, they have been addressed by many commissions from the Baker study and other studies who understand, what shall we do for Iraq and how can we do to save Iraq in general and the area or the minorities which is part of the problem now, not the whole problem, of course.But the immediate needs are the immediate needs of what's happening to the minorities there, which is inside Iraq and outside Iraq. That could be done very easily. That could be done now, when we sit down and decide, how can we help those inside Iraq, Nineveh Plains or someone? For Mandaean, maybe that's a different story. We can talk about

different things inside, like Amadou or by that, and what's happening outside Iraq. Our problem, for example, most of the Iraqi refugees are in Syria. We don't talk as a country. We don't talk to Syria. There's no money. The only money that went to Syria, I think, one million or less than one million dollar, while to Jordan, it's about 700 million, beginning of the war, and last year was about 10 million to help them support the huge refugee crisis that's happening in those two countries. And really, we can do through other agencies, through other countries, through being a leadership in giving these solutions and at least supporting those two communities inside and outside Iraq, which is an immediate need which can be done very easily. But the long-term solution, I think, yes, we want Iraq, we want to stay in Iraq, we don't want to leave Iraq, but an Iraq that we can survive in, not next day we die.

MR. CROMARTIE: Yes. We'll have one more comment, and then Commissioner Land.

MS. WARDA: I think it's normal to see for - it's normal to see that in Iraq, every Iraqi must feel Iraqi everywhere in Iraq in the future, and to have somewhere where when problems are, to be safe, I think it's something to be a thing. There are one million Kurdish in Baghdad. There are, I don't know how many thousand in Basra, in Anbar, in anywhere, you know. Iraq is Iraq. We can live where we want to live, but it's not necessary to gather all Christians from the South to the North to the Nineveh Plain. Everyone will live where he's okay I think is something very, very logic and normal. We must work on that people feel they have a house somewhere where they can be, you know, is better than to be in foreign houses, Jordan, Syria, Iran. We have many who are still in Iran. It's not just Shi'a who's still in Iran. They must come back.

IMAM EID: So providing special area in Iraq is like -

MS. WARDA: One of the solutions.

IMAM EID: Not a permanent solution, but at least a solution for now would be doable?

MS. WARDA: I think as we see our situation of a hundred year of Iraq, we still live in the same hell, so I think it's a solution. It's one of the solutions possible.

MR. CROMARTIE: Commissioner Land.

MR. LAND: One of the more -

MR. CROMARTIE: By the way, we have about seven minutes.

MR. LAND: One of the more controversial - not surprising, but controversial - parts of Canon White's testimony was the differing level of understanding that he had encountered from the department, the U.S. Department of Defense, as opposed to the U.S. Department of State. Have you perceived a similar difference of understanding of your concerns and your dire situation between the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Department of State?

MR. CROMARTIE: Who would like to go first, Michael?

MR. YOUASH: I'd like to answer that, and I know time is an issue, but first, anecdotally. You know, the religious freedoms report of the State Department made a finding in 2006 that the situation during the December elections and the October referendum had improved - which were held in 2005 - in comparison to the barriers of voting, disenfranchisement, that I spoke of in January 2005. And the reason for that was the lack of reported cases by the IECE, the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq. This just shows what I guess in military terms is called the lack of situational awareness by State Department officials. I had to sit down and explain to State Department officials that it was nothing of the sort. They completely misread the situation. What, indeed, happened is that in January 2005, an entire region consisting of minorities - Shabaks, Yazidis and Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, predominantly - was completely disenfranchised, denied the vote, and they complained and they protested and they took to the streets. Neither the U.S. government nor the IECE nor the Iraqi government did anything, and these people who exercised their right to protest were left looking down, proverbially, the barrel of a gun at the people they had just accused, and no one did anything. So what happened in October and December is that the same violations took place. These people just knew better than to protest. The State Department, there are some good people in it, individuals, but as an institution has often just completely misread or actually been almost willfully neglectful of the situation of minorities, and I can't answer as to why. Commissioner Nina Shea raised an instance where the special inspector general seems to outwardly have dodged a question by providing information that's just completely not credible in order to dodge the issue.

MR. LAND: Do you find more awareness or understanding from people in the Defense Department?

MR. YOUASH: I would say that I do, but I don't think that they've been giving a mandate, and in fact, the entire United States Government has not, does not seem to have been given a mandate to cope with the minority issues, to deal with the minority issues, and I think this is where the U.S. Commission is distinguishing itself in saying a mandate is required. This is not about preference; it's about saving people, saving pluralism and building democracy.

DR. NASHI: Thank you for your question. I just want to add that I, personally, I've seen more understanding, and the State Department, I saw a huge difference in their stand over the last few years. And the first time we met them, like six years ago and Saddam was there, their first question was, who are you? They've never heard of the Mandaeans in Iraq. But in general, as understanding of the situation of minority in Iraq, I saw a huge, especially this year, a huge understanding and better understanding with some sort of movement towards a direction. Unfortunately, I've never seen - I didn't see it from other departments in this way.

(Off mike.)

MR. CROMARTIE: Well, ladies and gentlemen, we're out of time, and we need to clear this room for the next meeting that occurs here. But before we leave, I do want to thank our witnesses for their time and for their -

MR. LAND: Courage.

MR. CROMARTIE: - I was, well, I was going to say, and their courage. Thank you, Commissioner Land. (Laughter.) Thank you for your good work and your courage and your diligence and your passion, and this has been extremely helpful. This could not have occurred and would not have happened if it weren't for the diligent work of the staff of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. They have assembled an outstanding group of witnesses, and that is not an easy task, and all the details have gone well, and so please, as you leave, if you meet a Commission staff person, thank them for all their good work on this. Again, thank each of you for coming. We're very grateful. And this has been extremely helpful. And thank you to the audience for joining us. We thank you.

(END) Michael Cromartie, Chair • Preeta D. Bansal, Vice Chair • Richard D. Land, Vice Chair • Don Argue • Imam Talal Y. Eid • Felice D. Gaer • Leonard A. Leo • Elizabeth H. Prodromou • Nina Shea • Ambassador John V. Hanford III, Ex-Officio