

Iraq: USCIRF decries attacks in letter to Negroponte

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) wrote to U.S. Ambassador to Iraq John D. Negroponte urging him to encourage the leaders of the Iraqi Interim Government to take a clear and public stand in affirmation of the Transitional Administrative Law's (TAL) provisions on freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief, as well as related human rights, to Iraqi society and its future stability. The Commission is concerned about the ongoing violence in Iraq, particularly the deliberate policy of targeting religious institutions or leaders, including Shi'a leaders and mosques and churches in Baghdad and Mosul. "Iraq is at a crossroads," said USCIRF Chair Preeta D. Bansal. "The United States must press the Iraqi Interim government to use every opportunity to reaffirm publicly the religious freedom protections set forth and guaranteed in the TAL to ensure that freedom for all Iraqis is protected." The text of the letter follows: Dear Ambassador Negroponte: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent bipartisan federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, is deeply concerned about the ongoing violence in Iraq, particularly the deliberate policy of targeting religious institutions or leaders. As you are aware, Shi'a leaders and mosques have been targets of terrorist bombings, such as the August 2003 killing of Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim as he left the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf, the March 2004 attacks on Shi'a mosques in Baghdad and Karbala that killed approximately 140 people, and most recently, the simultaneous attack on four churches in Baghdad and Mosul that left at least ten people dead. The Commission was heartened to learn that many leading Muslim clerics and political leaders, including Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, quickly and vociferously condemned these coordinated attacks against Iraq's Christian minority. You noted during your swearing in as U.S. Ambassador to Iraq that your mission includes the promotion of human rights and the rule of law. We urge you therefore to remain firm in your commitment to ensure that freedoms for all Iraqis are protected, including freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief, and to promote religious coexistence by consistently raising the importance of guaranteeing permanent constitutional protections for these and related freedoms with your Iraqi counterparts. Thank you for your consideration of the Commission's views. Respectfully, Preeta D. Bansal

Preeta D. Bansal, Chair

- Felice D. Gaer, Vice Chair Nina Shea, Vice Chair Patti Chang Archbishop Charles J. Chaput Khaled Abou El Fadl Richard Land Bishop Ricardo Ramirez Michael K. Young Ambassador John V. Hanford III, Ex-Officio Joseph R. Crapa, Executive Director