

## Iraq Press Conference - Statement of Rep. Van Hollen

STATEMENT OF

REPRESENTATIVE CHRIS VAN HOLLEN

I would like to commend the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, its members and staff for drawing attention to the serious problem of religious persecution in Iraq today and, in particular, to the widespread physical and political persecution of Christians and other small religious minority groups, such as the Mandaean and Yazidis. It is a travesty that what we are seeing in Iraq today is persecution of Christians and other minorities, simply because of their religious affiliation -- in many cases by groups who themselves suffered at the hands of Saddam Hussein's brutality.

In the last three months alone it is estimated that about one half of the 20,000 Christians in the largely Kurdish city of Mosul have fled that city. Since the US invasion in 2003 over one third of the Christian population of Iraq, a community of some 800,000, has left the country. According to UNHCR, while Christians made up nearly 4 percent of Iraq's pre-war population, they make up some 40 percent of Iraq's refugees. In just over five years, a unique religious and cultural community with roots stretching back almost 2000 years in Mesopotamia has been ravaged and could be lost if the current trend is permitted to continue. This is a far cry from the 'new' Iraq that Americans were told was going to rise out of the ashes of Saddam Hussein's departure and serve as a beacon for the Middle East region.

I join the Commission in its recommendation to include Iraq among the "countries of particular concern" and to call for the United States to bring its unique influence to bear to change this situation.

With the release of this report, the Commission states its clear determination to prompt the Iraqi government to address the root causes of the wave of religious persecution sweeping its country. U.S. foreign policymakers need to answer the Commission's call and use the levers at our disposal to help put an end to religiously motivated violence in Iraq.