

## 8/14/09: USCIRF Calls for Increased Protection of All Iraqi Religious and Ethnic Communities

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 14, 2009

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is deeply concerned about the recent upsurge of sectarian violence in Iraq. Among the most recent bombings, a village outside of Mosul inhabited by Shabak, an ethnic and predominantly Shiite minority, was completely destroyed by two large truck bombs, killing at least 28 people and injuring at least 150. In addition, a café in the Yazidi town of Sinjar was attacked by two suicide bombers, killing at least 21 and injuring at least 30. The Yazidi are a small religious minority indigenous to northern Iraq.

“The Iraqi government must do much more to prevent a return to escalating sectarian conflict,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. “This includes providing visible and effective protection to all religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq, ensuring greater sectarian integration into the government and security forces, and bolstering police protection where it is needed the most by shifting resources when necessary. The government also needs to promote reconciliation and religious tolerance by maintaining a truly operational national human rights commission, by doing a far better job of investigating and prosecuting acts of sectarian violence, and by facilitating interfaith conflict resolution and dialogue amongst Iraq’s youth.”

The attacks that took place Friday, August 7, Monday, August 10, and Thursday, August 13, were among the worst since U.S. troops withdrew from Iraqi cities on June 30. According to reports, at least 120 persons have been killed, and hundreds more injured in a wave of bombings targeting, in addition to the Shabak and Yazidi communities, Turkomen Shiite pilgrims, Shiite pilgrims country-wide, predominantly Shiite areas in Baghdad, and other areas of the capital city.

In the lead-up to and since June 30, the country has witnessed an increase in sectarian attacks, with dozens of bombings and suicide attacks killing more than 500 Iraqis from all religious backgrounds. The targets have included religious sites, including mosques and churches, and religious processions. “It is imperative that the Iraqi government ensure that houses of worship and religious events are respected and protected in Iraq,” said Mr. Leo.

Analysts speculate that al-Qaeda operatives and similar insurgent groups are responsible for most of the attacks in an attempt to return Iraq to sectarian war, which engulfed the country in 2006 and 2007, and intensify Arab-Kurd tensions.

Monday’s attack devastating the Shabak village of Khazna was reminiscent of an August 2007 attack in Sinjar, which targeted and killed almost 800 Yazidis. Both towns are located in the Nineveh governorate. USCIRF has consistently called for increased protection for religious and ethnic minorities in Nineveh governorate who are caught in the middle of an Arab-Kurd struggle over disputed territories.

USCIRF recommended that Iraq should be named a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act in 2008 and 2009 due the Iraqi government's failure to protect the country's smallest religious minorities and the role of Iraqi security forces in sectarian conflict.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director, at [tcarter@uscirf.gov](mailto:tcarter@uscirf.gov) or (202) 523-3257.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.