



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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April 7, 2017

The Honorable Christopher H. Smith
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Anna G. Eshoo
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representatives Smith and Eshoo,

As Chair of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), I commend you for advancing the "Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act" (H.R. 390). This legislation appropriately focuses on atrocities being committed against Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Syria.

I understand that this new legislation takes the Genocide Resolution (H.Con.Res. 75) one step further and seeks to help those who have been harmed and to hold the perpetrators accountable. As the situation in Syria and Iraq remains dire for minorities, I note that H.R. 390 calls for much needed assistance for survivors of genocide and would allow faith-based organizations (such as Catholic Relief Services) that are already providing humanitarian assistance to these populations, to access U.S. government funding in their work.

Over the years, the Catholic Church has consistently supported Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities facing persecution in the Middle East, many of whom are internally displaced or have fled as refugees. Pope Francis has denounced the persecution, torture and killing of Christians in the Middle East, calling it a "form of genocide." He lamented the wider conflicts that have put so many in danger and has condemned the actions of those who persecute others solely for reasons of their faith and ethnicity. In a 2014 letter to the UN, Pope Francis said, "The most basic understanding of human dignity compels the international community, particularly through the norms and mechanisms of international law, to do all that it can to stop and prevent further systematic violence against ethnic and religious minorities and to protect innocent peoples."

In testimony before Congress, USCCB recognized that "these casualties and forced displacements are not due solely to religious persecution, but [also to] the weakening of the rule of law" and to the social exclusion that has fueled the rise of extremist groups such as ISIS. Since military force alone will not build security, our nation needs to work with other nations in the region and internationally to help build inclusive governance that recognizes the rights of all, and to provide aid to reestablish the necessary infrastructure for a viable economy. USCCB stands ready to assist in the resettlement of all vulnerable refugees from Syria and Iraq who are unable to return home.

I commend you for your efforts to support those suffering persecution in Iraq and Syria and hope that this legislation will contribute to a longer-term solution to the crisis in the region.

Sincerely yours,

Most Reverend Oscar Cantú
Bishop of Las Cruces

Chair, Committee on International Justice and Peace