



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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September 21, 2016

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 of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), I commend you for introducing the bipartisan H.R. 5961, the “Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act of 2016.” In March 2016, you and many of the bill’s cosponsors were instrumental in ensuring the passage of H. Con. Res 75, the “Genocide” resolution that drew attention to the atrocities being committed against Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Syria. Your bipartisan support on this issue certainly complemented Secretary of State John Kerry’s decision on March 17 to declare that Daesh/ISIS was committing genocide against these groups in areas under its control.

We appreciate that this new legislation takes the Genocide resolution one step further and seeks to help those who have been harmed and to hold the perpetrators accountable. In particular, it is noteworthy that H.R. 5961 calls for assistance for survivors of genocide and allows faith-based organizations (such as Catholic Relief Services), who already have a record of providing humanitarian assistance to these populations, to be funded for their work. The bill also creates a Priority Two (P-2) designation so that survivors of genocide may have another path to apply for resettlement in the United States. As noted in testimony prepared for delivery to the Helsinki Commission on September 22, 2016, our Migration and Refugee Services has concerns about one area of the bill related to the P-2 designation and respectfully requests changes as the bill moves through the legislative process. We believe that a traditional P-2 designation would increase the access that Christians and other religious minorities have to the U.S. refugee admissions program.

Our Committee has consistently raised its voice in support of Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities who are facing persecution in the Middle East. USCCB has joined with Pope Francis in condemning the actions of those who would persecute others solely for reasons of their faith and ethnicity. Last year, in testifying before the Senate, I also acknowledged that “these casualties and forced displacements are not due solely to religious persecution, but [to] the weakening of the rule of law” that has fostered the rise of extremist groups such as ISIS. There is a need for the international community to use proportionate force to stop unjust aggressors to protect religious minorities and civilians, but it is equally important to build inclusive governments that recognize the rights of all citizens and to provide aid to reestablish the necessary infrastructure for a viable economy. USCCB stands ready to assist in the resettlement of those vulnerable refugees from Syria and Iraq who are unable to return home.

May I again commend you for your efforts to help and support the suffering victims of persecution in Iraq and Syria. I 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
Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace