



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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March 2, 2012

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton:

On behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I write to express profound concerns regarding the difficult situation involving our nation, the international community and Iran. Those concerns center on Iran's refusal to acknowledge its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and open its facilities for inspection. Their refusal exacerbates suspicions that Iran is developing its nuclear capability to produce weapons rather than energy.

There has been an alarming escalation in rhetoric and tensions. The United States and the European Union have legitimately applied additional economic sanctions against Iran. Iran has threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz to commercial traffic. Recent news accounts speculating on the possible use of force against Iran, including an Israeli pre-emptive strike on Iranian nuclear facilities, are especially troubling.

Based on the Church's teaching on war and peace, the Bishops' Conference urges the U.S. Government to continue to explore all available options to resolve the conflict with Iran through diplomatic, rather than military, means. As Pope Benedict XVI has stated: "As far as Iran is concerned, tireless efforts must be made to seek a negotiated solution to the controversy concerning the nation's nuclear program, through a mechanism capable of satisfying the legitimate demands of the country and of the international community." Before military options are considered, all alternatives, including effective and targeted sanctions and incentives for Iran to engage in diplomacy and cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), need to be exhausted.

From a moral perspective, in the absence of an immediate threat against the United States or our allies, military action would constitute an act of preventive war. The Catholic Church teaches: "[E]ngaging in a preventive war without clear proof that an attack is imminent cannot fail to raise serious moral and juridical questions." (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no. 501) In Catholic teaching, the use of force must always be a last resort. Iran's bellicose statements, its failure to be transparent about its nuclear program and its possible acquisition of nuclear weapons are serious matters, but in themselves they do not justify military action.

Discussing or promoting military options at this time is unwise and may be counterproductive. Actual or threatened military strikes are likely to strengthen the regime in power in Iran and would further marginalize those in Iran who want to abide by international norms. And, as the experience in Iraq teaches, the use of force can have many unintended consequences.

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The Church's position against nuclear non-proliferation is clear. We believe nuclear weapons violate the just war norms of proportionality and discrimination in the use of force. Our Bishops' Conference has earlier indicated our strong objection to Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons as it would further destabilize that volatile region and undermine nonproliferation efforts. We have often criticized Iran's lack of transparency and cooperation with International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors.

The supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei recently said that Iran is "not seeking nuclear weapons because the Islamic Republic of Iran considers possession of nuclear weapons a sin . . . and believes that holding such weapons is useless, harmful and dangerous." Iran ought to back up Ayatollah Khamenei's words with actions. Iran should concretely demonstrate its willingness to provide IAEA inspectors access to all nuclear facilities.

Iran is an example of the significant threat posed to global security by a proliferation of nuclear weapons. The specific situation of Iran should be viewed within the wider search for a just and peaceful world built on nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament. A morally responsible nonproliferation strategy must be tied to a clear strategy for reducing and ultimately ending the reliance on nuclear weapons by any country. The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty itself ties nonproliferation to eventual nuclear disarmament.

As Secretary of State, you stated that the U.S. Government's dual-track strategy on Iran was "not only about applying pressure," it was also about "engaging Iran." We urge the Administration to continue to seek to resolve concerns over Iran's nuclear program in ways that reduce the threat of nuclear non-proliferation while maintaining stability in the Middle East.

Sincerely yours,

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The Most Reverend Richard E. Pates
Bishop of Des Moines
Chairman