



***Committee on International
Justice and Peace***



THE ETHICS & RELIGIOUS
LIBERTY COMMISSION
OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

March 4, 2014

Senator Tom Coburn
U.S. Senate
Russell Senate Office Building Room 172
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Mike Lee
U.S. Senate
Hart Senate Office Building Room 316
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Coburn and Lee,

It has come to our attention that you have placed a hold on S. 653, a bill to establish a Special Envoy to Promote Religious Freedom of Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia. As the representatives of two of the largest Christian denominations in the country, we write today to urge you to work with us in addressing the growing crisis of religious minorities in this region.

According to a January 2014 Pew Research Center study, one third (33%) of the 198 countries surveyed had high religious hostilities (up from 20% in 2007). The study indicates that religious hostilities increased in most of the world, but particularly in the Middle East. Given this situation, we believe that a Special Envoy is needed to focus on the dire situation affecting religious minorities, especially Christians who are the group most targeted for harassment and attacks in the largest number of countries.

We envision this envoy working in partnership with the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom and the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom, but concentrating on the growing challenges of protecting historic Christian communities and promoting the rights of all religious minorities in the Middle East and South Central Asia.

The October 2010 attack on the Syrian Catholic cathedral in Baghdad that killed 58; the destruction of about 40 Coptic churches in Egypt in August 2013; the assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti, Minister for Minority Affairs, due to his push to amend Pakistan's draconian blasphemy laws; the targeting by Hindu extremists of Christian villages in India – these are but a few examples of the ongoing violence faced by religious minorities.

In many instances, religious minorities have lived for centuries side by side with those of other faiths, but now find themselves coming under increased attack and harassment. Over 8 million Syrians, many of whom are Christians, are caught in the cross-fire between the government and opposition forces, and have fled their homes, becoming internally displaced or flooding into neighboring countries. A Special Envoy, working in collaboration with the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, can help insure that basic human rights of these minority communities, who face such enormous threats, are protected

Letter to Senators Coburn and Lee

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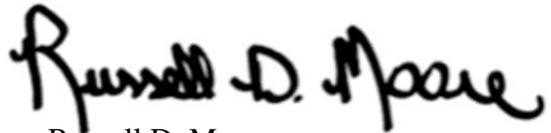
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Our faith traditions are united in our commitment to protecting the poor and vulnerable and promoting religious freedom for all. We urge you to consider the great need for freedom and the threat of often deadly persecution faced by religious minorities as they seek to worship and practice their faith and allow S. 653 to go forward for a vote now.

Sincerely,

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Most Reverend Richard E. Pates
Bishop of Des Moines
Chair, Committee on International
Justice and Peace, U.S. Conference
of Catholic Bishops



Russell D. Moore
President
Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious
Liberty Commission