



Department of Social Development and World Peace Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on Iraq February 2007

CURRENT SITUATION

The deteriorating situation in Iraq, together with new Congressional leadership and the report by the Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan effort chaired by former Secretary James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton, have increased political pressures within the U.S. to reevaluate U.S. policy toward Iraq .

On January 10, President Bush set out a new policy to meet the growing violence; it calls for a surge of about 20,000 U.S. troops in Iraq and the doubling of provincial reconstruction teams to help local Iraqi communities. The new Democratic majority and many Republicans in Congress are skeptical of the President's policy. Various congressional resolutions are pending which question the policy and ask for specific benchmarks to be met in an ongoing assessment of effectiveness.

The elections of January 2005 and December 2005 and the adoption of a constitution in October 2005 were seen as signs of progress for Iraqis, but the situation in Iraq has deteriorated seriously. The need to establish security remains paramount.

Terrorists and insurgents continue to target both security forces and civilians in an effort to destabilize the government. The U.S. remains in the difficult position of trying to provide basic security even though its presence is resented by many Iraqis and much of the Muslim world. The reports of prisoner abuse and mistreatment of detainees have also compromised the role of occupation forces. On the other hand, many Iraqi leaders have made it clear that the presence of Coalition forces is important to stabilize the country. Other important ways to enhance security are to accelerate economic and social reconstruction in Iraq; but both seem to be lagging.

For Iraqi Christians, the security situation continues to worsen. For a long time many Christians viewed the attacks on Christians as attacks on all Iraqis and this may still be the case to a large extent. However, a pattern of deliberate violence against Christians and other vulnerable minorities is emerging. The continuing violence and instability has led to a high proportion of Iraqi refugees being Christians. Earlier statements by Shia leaders that they will respect the rights of minorities were encouraging, but many still fear that the new Iraqi government may not fully respect religious liberty. The adopted constitution has contradictory clauses regarding human rights and religious liberty. A key now is the implementation of the constitution in law and practice. Many agree that the role of Islam must be respected, but this must be done in a way that protects the rights of religious minorities, including Christian minorities.

THE BISHOPS' POSITION PRIOR TO THE WAR

USCCB issued four major letters/statements prior to the war, including a statement of the USCCB President that outlines the bishops' position:

Our bishops' conference continues to question the moral legitimacy of any preemptive, unilateral use of military force to overthrow the government of Iraq. To permit preemptive or preventive uses of military force to overthrow threatening or hostile regimes would create deeply troubling moral and legal precedents. Based on the facts that are known, it is difficult to justify resort to war against Iraq, lacking

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clear and adequate evidence of an imminent attack of a grave nature or Iraq's involvement in the terrorist attacks of September 11. With the Holy See and many religious leaders throughout the world, we believe that resort to war would not meet the strict conditions in Catholic teaching for the use of military force. (2/26/2003)

USCCB POSITION

In November 2006, Bishop William Skylstad, President of USCCB, issued a major statement on a “Call for Dialogue and Action on *Responsible Transition* in Iraq.” The statement was discussed and affirmed by the full body of bishops gathered in plenary assembly. The statement was based on an earlier one issued by Bishop Thomas Wenski, Chairman of the Committee on International Policy.

In the wake of the President’s new plan for Iraq, Bishop Skylstad on January 12 issued “Evaluating Plans for a Responsible Transition in Iraq.” The newest statement reiterates the “grave moral concerns about military intervention in Iraq and the unpredictable and uncontrollable negative consequences of invasion and occupation” that were expressed by the Holy See and the bishops’ Conference. However, it goes on to argue that the Conference now supports “broader regional and international engagement to increase security, stability and reconstruction in Iraq.”

The statement lifts up a key moral question that ought to guide our nation’s actions: “How can the U.S. bring about a responsible transition in Iraq?” Each alternative course of action “ought to be evaluated in light of our nation’s moral responsibility to help Iraqis to live with security and dignity in the aftermath of U.S. military action. Our nation’s military forces should remain in Iraq only as long as their presence actually contributes to a responsible transition. Our nation should seek effective ways to end their deployment at the earliest opportunity consistent with this goal.”

Concretely, basic benchmarks for evaluating progress toward a responsible transition include: “minimally acceptable levels of security; economic reconstruction to create employment for Iraqis; and political structures and agreements that help overcome divisions, reduce violence, broaden participation, and increase respect for religious freedom and basic human rights.” The benchmarks ought to be measured in light of “the traditional principle of ‘probability of success.’”

In repeatedly calling for a “responsible transition,” the Conference consistently highlighted the need for substantive and civil discussion of ways to bring about a responsible transition in Iraq.

USCCB acknowledges that the work of stabilizing and rebuilding Iraq rests primarily on Iraqis, but the United States must play a key role in supporting Iraqis and engaging other countries in the region and the international community in the task.

Of special concern is the dire situation of Christians and other minorities in Iraq. Their particular vulnerability is a sign of the violence and lack of the rule of law that affects all Iraqis. This concern is reflected in USCCB’s major statements on Iraq. In addition, Bishop Skylstad has written a letter of solidarity to Patriarch Emmanuel III Delly on the targeting of Christian Churches for attacks; and USCCB has brought the situation of Christians to the attention of the U.S. State Department, urging the U.S. to review economic reconstruction aid programs to ensure that aid is distributed fairly to all elements of Iraqi society, to institute a more generous U.S. refugee and asylum policy, and to encourage the central government of Iraq and the Kurdish regional government to respect the rights of Christians and other minorities.

ACTION REQUESTED

Urge members of Congress to assess whether U.S. policies move toward a “responsible transition” or

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are “likely to increase divisions, violence and loss of life.” Ask them to evaluate benchmarks for a “responsible transition” in light of the traditional principle of “probability of success,” with our military forces remaining only as long as their presence can contribute to a “responsible transition.”

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