



## Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

### **Background on Iraq May 2008**

*In Iraq too, reconciliation is urgently needed! At present, terrorist attacks, threats and violence continue, especially against the Christian community...; it is clear that certain difficult political issues remain unresolved. In this context, an appropriate constitutional reform will need to safeguard the rights of minorities. Important humanitarian aid is necessary for the peoples affected by the war; I am thinking especially of displaced persons within the country and refugees who have fled abroad, among whom there are many Christians.*

--Pope Benedict XVI, January 7, 2008

#### **CURRENT SITUATION**

The situation in Iraq remains grave. In January 2007, President Bush set out a new policy to meet the growing violence; it called for a surge of about 20,000 U.S. troops in Iraq and the doubling of provincial reconstruction teams to help local Iraqi communities. More than a year later, the Democratic majority and many Republicans in Congress remain skeptical of the President's policy. Throughout the past year various congressional resolutions, bills and amendments were introduced which question the policy and ask for specific benchmarks to be met in an ongoing assessment of effectiveness. None of them have become law.

The Iraqi 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 surge had reduced large scale military conflicts and created some space for political reconciliation, but smaller, decentralized acts of violence remained widespread. As the more recent larger scale conflict between Iraqi government forces and Shiite militia makes clear, 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 earlier 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 the continuing violence has largely stymied progress on these fronts. Out of a total population of about 27 million, more than 2 million Iraqis are internally displaced from their homes and another 2 million are refugees who have fled the country, many to neighboring Syria and Jordan.

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 by extremist groups has emerged, powerfully symbolized by the kidnapping and death of Archbishop Rahho of Mosul in March 2008. The continuing violence and instability has led to a high proportion of Iraqi refugees being Christians. Earlier statements by Shiite 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, questioning the moral legitimacy of any preemptive, unilateral use of military force to overthrow the government of Iraq as such actions would create deeply troubling moral and legal precedents. The Conference expressed "grave moral concerns about military

**3211 Fourth St., NE, Washington, DC 20017. Tel: (202)541-3160 Fax: (202)541-3339**

intervention in Iraq and the unpredictable and uncontrollable negative consequences of invasion and occupation.” With the Holy See the Conference maintained that resort to war would not meet the strict conditions in Catholic teaching for the use of military force.

## **USCCB POSITION**

For over two years, USCCB has consistently highlighted the need for bipartisan cooperation to bring about a responsible transition to end the war in Iraq. During the summer and fall USCCB intensified efforts to promote bipartisan action for a responsible transition in Iraq. In July 2007, a number of Members of Congress requested a meeting on Iraq. In response Bishop Wenski, Chairman of the International Justice and Peace Committee, agreed to work on a bipartisan basis. He stated: “[O]ur nation must have the moral courage to change course in Iraq and to break the policy and political stalemate in Washington so that we can walk a difficult path that does the most good and the least damage in human and moral terms.”

In September Bishop Wenski sent a letter to the Members of Congress and Administration officials in which he raised difficult ethical questions regarding the road ahead and reiterated the goal of a “responsible transition” as an ethical framework for national decisions. This letter provided the moral framework for an unprecedented bipartisan “off the record” meeting with over twenty-five Members of Congress that was held in October.

At the time of the Bishops’ meeting in November 2007, two public steps were taken:

- The full body of bishops affirmed Bishop William S. Skylstad’s “Call for Bipartisan Cooperation on Responsible Transition in Iraq;” and
- It was accompanied by “Questions and Answers on the War in Iraq” by Bishop Thomas G. Wenski.

**Current USCCB policy** calls for bipartisan cooperation on the war in Iraq that breaks the political stalemate in Washington and promotes a “responsible transition” and withdrawal at the earliest opportunity consistent with that goal. A responsible transition needs to minimize further loss of human life, address the humanitarian crisis in Iraq and the refugee crisis in the region, promote political reconciliation in Iraq, and engage international support for stabilizing Iraq, including engagement with Syria and Iran.

Of special concern to USCCB is the dire situation of Christians and other minorities in Iraq. This concern is reflected in USCCB’s major statements on Iraq and was reiterated in June 2007 when Bishop Wenski issued a public “Plea for Solidarity with Religious Minorities in Iraq.” USCCB has focused particular attention on the dire situation of refugees, a disproportionate number of whom are Christians. MRS and CRS sponsored a fact finding trip to the region in July 2007. The delegation led by Cardinal McCarrick and Bishop DiMarzio issued a report entitled, “Escaping Mayhem and Murder: Iraqi Refugees in the Middle East.”

## **ACTION REQUESTED**

Pope John Paul II and the U.S. bishops raised grave moral questions regarding war in Iraq; now USCCB urges our leaders to break the political stalemate in Washington in order to bring about “a responsible transition...sooner rather than later” that aims to reduce further loss of life, addresses the humanitarian crisis in Iraq and the refugee crisis in the region, helps rebuild the war-torn country, and engages international support, including Syria and Iran. Our military forces should remain in Iraq only as long as their presence can contribute to a “responsible transition.” Our nation needs a new comprehensive political, diplomatic and economic effort to reduce the war’s deadly toll.

Urge members of the House to cosponsor House Concurrent Resolution 228. USCCB supports “the Resolution’s emphasis on a comprehensive diplomatic initiative with a continued ‘drawdown and eventual departure’ of our armed forces in a “responsible manner” and “welcomes the Resolution’s clear concern for displaced persons and refugees and its focus on reconstruction and relief” and the welfare of our military personnel. Also urge Congress to support strong funding in the FY09 Budget and the FY08 Supplemental to rebuild Iraq and assist Iraqi refugees and displaced families.

**For information:** visit [www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/iraq.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/iraq.shtml) or contact *Stephen Colecchi*, Director, Office of International Justice and Peace, USCCB, 202-541-3160 (phone); 202-541-3339 (fax); [scolecchi@usccb.org](mailto:scolecchi@usccb.org); on refugees contact *Kevin Appleby*, MRS, USCCB, 202-541-3260, [KAppleby@usccb.org](mailto:KAppleby@usccb.org).

**3211 Fourth St., NE. Washington, DC 20017. Tel: (202)541-3160 Fax: (202)541-3339**