



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

### **Background on Iraq February 2009**

*To the Iraqis, who are preparing again to take full control of their future, I offer a particular word of encouragement to turn the page and to look forward in order to rebuild without discrimination on the basis of race, ethnic group or religion.*  
--Pope Benedict XVI, January 7, 2008

#### **CURRENT SITUATION**

The situation in Iraq remains challenging, but overall violence is down significantly and Iraq held provincial elections in February 2009 without any reports of serious violence. The new Obama Administration has promised to “responsibly end the war in Iraq” through a “phased withdrawal” of combat troops that gives Iraqi leaders time to “move toward political reconciliation and away from sectarianism.”

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 then the situation in Iraq deteriorated. In January 2007, President Bush set out a new policy to meet the growing violence in Iraq. 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. The surge, combined with a realignment of tribal forces and former insurgents against al-Qaeda in Iraq’s brutal tactics, contributed to a reduction in violence. But these gains remain fragile in the absence of political accommodation and reconciliation within Iraq. The surge reduced large scale military conflicts and created space for political reconciliation, but smaller, decentralized acts of violence remained.

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 had also compromised the role of occupation forces. On the other hand, many Iraqi leaders support the presence of Coalition forces to stabilize the country. Important ways to enhance security include accelerating economic and social reconstruction in Iraq. 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 overall situation is particularly difficult. For a long time many Iraqi Christians viewed the attacks on Christians as attacks on all Iraqis and this may still be the case to a certain 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. Violence and instability has led to a high proportion of Iraqi refugees being Christians. Some Shiite leaders made statements early on that they will respect the rights of minorities, but many fear that the new Iraqi government may not fully respect religious liberty. The adopted constitution has contradictory clauses regarding human rights and religious liberty. How the constitution is implemented will be critical.

#### **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 intervention in Iraq and the unpredictable and uncontrollable negative consequences of invasion

and occupation.” With the Holy See the Conference maintained that resorting to war would not meet the strict conditions in Catholic teaching for the use of military force.

## **USCCB POSITION**

For over three years, USCCB has consistently highlighted the need for bipartisan cooperation to bring about a “responsible transition to end the war in Iraq.” In July 2007, a number of Members of Congress requested a meeting on Iraq. In response Bishop Thomas 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 2007 Bishop Wenski sent a letter to Congress and the Administration 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 2007.

At the time of the Bishops’ meeting in November 2007, the full body of bishops affirmed USCCB President Bishop William Skylstad’s “Call for Bipartisan Cooperation on Responsible Transition in Iraq.” The statement was released with “Questions and Answers on the War in Iraq” prepared by Bishop Thomas Wenski.

In March 2008, Bishop Wenski urged members of the House to cosponsor House Concurrent Resolution 288. USCCB supported “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.

**Current USCCB policy** calls for bipartisan cooperation on the war in Iraq 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 most recently in an October 2008 letter to the National Security Advisor. USCCB has focused particular attention on the dismal 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**

The U.S. bishops raised grave moral questions prior to the war in Iraq; now USCCB urges “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, promotes political reconciliation in Iraq, and engages international support, including Syria and Iran. The new Administration’s actions to “responsibly end the war in Iraq” need to be evaluated in light of these factors.

**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); [scolecchi@usccb.org](mailto:scolecchi@usccb.org); on refugees contact *Kevin Appleby*, MRS, USCCB, 202-541-3260, [KAppleby@usccb.org](mailto:KAppleby@usccb.org).