



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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January 20, 2016

The Honorable John Kerry
Secretary of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry:

As Chair of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I welcomed the adoption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) by the United States and its P5+1 partners with Iran. In September 2015, the Holy See expressed the “hope that the full implementation of JCPOA will ensure the peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear programme under the NPT and will be a definitive step toward greater stability and security in the region.” I write to urge the United States to build on this achievement and to pursue peace in Syria and to strengthen political stability in Lebanon and the region.

The timely release of U.S. sailors and the recent return of U.S. prisoners are signs that the JCPOA may be fostering wider positive results. Having just made a solidarity visit to the region and having met with Syrian and Iraqi refugees, Church officials, and other leaders in Lebanon and Jordan, I can testify to the fact that the region is in chaos and the suffering is deep.

As you know too well, there is no doubt that pursuing peace in Syria and isolating extremists in Syria and Iraq are difficult missions, but they are not impossible ones. In both Syria and Iraq it is critical to promote inclusive governance so that all ethnic and religious groups have a stake in peace. We were told time and again that both global and regional powers need to be part of the solution as well. The United States, working with global and regional powers and the Syrian government and opposition, will need to be creative and flexible if the UN-led peace talks that commence in Geneva on January 25 are to be successful.

While peace is pursued, it is critical for our nation to exercise continued and redoubled efforts to deliver humanitarian assistance to displaced populations. The needs are simply outstripping the available resources. The World Food Program and other international aid programs are underfunded. Jordan and Lebanon have been remarkably generous to the call to welcome the stranger, and at great cost to their social systems. The President’s budget needs to increase both U.S. assistance to help these host populations and to strengthen humanitarian assistance accounts, including International Disaster Assistance, Migration and Refugee Assistance, Emergency Migration and Refugee Assistance, and Food for Peace Title II.

I was impressed with the work of Catholic Relief Services, our U.S.-based relief and development agency. CRS is partnering with the local Caritas agencies in Jordan and Lebanon to provide assistance to both host populations and refugees. They provide aid to Christians, Muslims, and other religious and ethnic minorities alike.

If peace talks are successful, the United States and the international community will need to provide robust assistance to help rebuild Syria so that refugees can return and the social fabric can be repaired. Post-war desperation will only fuel renewed conflict and extremism. It is particularly important that Syrian refugees in Lebanon have the opportunity to return to their country so as to restore the delicate demographic balance necessary for stability in Lebanon.

Letter to Secretary of State Kerry

January 20, 2016

Page 2

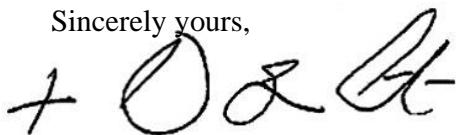
It is critical that the United States encourage the election of a President in Lebanon. For too long, international and local forces have militated against effective governance in Lebanon. This paralysis must end in order for Lebanon to weather better the crises sweeping the region.

Church leaders with whom we met are particularly concerned to preserve the Christian presence in the region, the birthplace of Christianity. This presence is not only important for the Church, but also for stability in the region. As one religious leader put it, “Christians can live without the Middle East; but the Middle East cannot live without Christians.” Their presence is important for encouraging tolerance and respect for pluralism. They are integral members of their societies.

In our visits with Christian refugees, we heard harrowing stories of persecution by the so-called Islamic State and other extremists. It is clear that they want to “cleanse” the region of Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities, and even of Muslims who dissent from their narrow, distorted and extremist ideology.

The path ahead will be arduous, but the time is long past for the international community to pursue diplomacy and peace in Syria and the region. In the final analysis only peace will end the refugee crisis, preserve the Christian presence, and allow inclusive societies to be built that respect the human rights of all.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read '+ O. Cantú'.

Most Reverend Oscar Cantú
Bishop of Las Cruces
Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops