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December 12, 2019

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Committee on International Justice and Peace, and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) we write to express our deep concern regarding proposals being considered by the Administration that would condition international life-saving humanitarian and poverty focused development assistance to people and communities in need based on how a country promotes and protects religious freedom.

Religious freedom is a cornerstone of a just society. We commend the Administration for its international commitment to defend religious freedom and develop durable, positive ways to combat religious persecution and unjust discrimination, including through tools like foreign assistance. USCCB and CRS were pleased to participate in the Second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom earlier this year. Moreover, we applaud the Administration's opposition to the persecution of the Rohingya, whose rights and identity are not recognized by their government; support for ethnic minorities in the Middle East, including Christians, who suffer from interminable conflicts; and promotion of inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony in countries such as Nigeria.

While we recognize our government's leadership in promoting freedom of conscience and religion for all, Catholic social teaching would rule out conditioning and subordinating life-saving humanitarian and poverty focused development assistance to people and communities in need based on a government's promotion or protection of religious liberty. In his 2015 address to the United Nations, Pope Francis said: "[T]he simplest and best measure and indicator of the implementation of the new agenda for development will be effective, practical and immediate access, on the part of all, to essential material and spiritual goods: housing, dignified and properly remunerated employment, adequate food and drinking water; religious freedom and, more generally, spiritual freedom and education." The Holy Father also teaches that integral human development must include *all elements of society*: "... the economy, finance, labor, culture, family life, and religion are, each in its own way, essential components of this growth. None of them can be rendered absolute and none of them can be excluded from a concept of integral human development which takes into account that the human life is like an orchestra that sounds good if the different instruments are in accord and follow a score shared by all."

Conditioning assistance that goes directly to poor and marginalized communities could also have the opposite effect of the intended goal. It could place religious and ethnic minorities in a position of further suffering and persecution, not only because they are often the vulnerable populations benefitting from such programs, but also because they could be blamed for a loss of assistance. Conditioning life-saving humanitarian and poverty focused development aid could undermine our

ability to uphold these humanitarian principles of providing assistance based on need. It could also jeopardize ongoing work to bridge divisions between communities and foster peace, leading to increased marginalization of the religious minorities we seek to support. Supporting such vulnerable minority religious and ethnic communities are also critical in building local civil society that can best advocate for necessary religious freedoms from within.

Furthermore, there are already well-designed tools available to the U.S. government to effectively enforce international religious freedom and human rights violations. As the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said in their 2017 Annual Report, the Administration should “use targeted tools against specific officials, agencies, and military units identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom.” Tools that could be used include the Global Magnitsky Act, the Treasury Department’s “specially designated nationals” (SDN) list, and other provisions under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

Therefore, we entreat you to press the Administration to honor our country’s longstanding tradition to provide life-saving humanitarian and poverty focused development assistance based on need. Thank you for considering this request. We look forward to continued partnership in our effort to build a more just and peaceful world, including through our collective support for international religious freedom.

Sincerely yours,



Most Reverend David J. Malloy
Bishop of Rockford
Chairman
Committee on International Justice and Peace
U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops



Mr. Sean Callahan
President
Catholic Relief Services

CC: Office of the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom
Office of the Administrator, United States Agency for International Development