



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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May 20, 2013

The Honorable Roy Blunt
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Carl Levin
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Blunt and Levin,

As Chair of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I commend your tireless efforts to advance religious freedom as evidenced by your sponsorship of S. 653, a bill to establish a Special Envoy to Promote Religious Freedom of Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia. Such an envoy, working in partnership with the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom and the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom, can address the particularly complex and dire situation of religious minorities in the region.

The bishops have long been concerned over the plight of religious minorities, particularly Christian communities in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Egypt, India and Pakistan, many of whom have lived for centuries side by side with those of other faiths, but now find themselves coming under increased attack and harassment. Such attacks have led many to flee, becoming displaced within their own country or escaping across the borders to seek refugee status, uncertain as to what the future holds. These migrations have led to the decimation of historic communities who have contributed much to the cultural, political, economic and social life of their countries.

Following egregious violence against religious minorities, such as church bombings in Egypt and Nigeria, bombings of Ahmadiyyah mosques and buses carrying Shi'a pilgrims in Pakistan, the attack on the Syrian Catholic cathedral in Baghdad, the assassination of Pakistan's Minister for Minority Affairs, the targeting by Hindu extremists of Christian villages in India, or riots in Burma that have killed almost 200 Muslims and left thousands homeless, we have strongly urged the Administration to press other governments to undertake concrete measures to respect and protect the human rights and religious freedom of all their citizens. Pope Benedict XVI convened the Synod for the Middle East in October 2010 out of a profound concern for the Christian presence in the region and called religious freedom, the "path to peace." On April 14, Pope Francis said, "Let us pray in a special way for the Christians who are suffering persecution ... so very many in many countries."

The Catholic Church views protection of religious freedom as a "cornerstone of the structure of human rights" since it is rooted in the dignity of the human person. Pope Francis, in one of his first homilies, called on political, economic and social leaders to be "protectors," showing "loving concern for each and every person." In keeping with this longstanding teaching, we commend you for introducing S. 653 and lend our support to passage of this legislation.

Sincerely yours,

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Most Reverend Richard E. Pates
Bishop of Des Moines
Chair, Committee on International Justice and Peace