



Office of the President

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Most Reverend Joseph E. Kurtz
Archbishop of Louisville
President

February 23, 2015

President Barack Obama
The White House
Washington, DC 20270

Dear Mr. President:

May God bless you in these difficult times!

The brutal murders of twenty-one Coptic Christians by the so-called Islamic State in Libya are grim reminders of the reality of religious persecution in the Middle East. As Pope Francis said, these Christians were beheaded “for the mere fact of being Christians.”

Pope Francis and the Holy See have reiterated on a number of occasions that it is “licit” to use force to stop these unjust aggressors and to protect religious minorities and civilians from these horrendous attacks. They have emphasized that the use of military force must be proportionate and discriminate, and employed within the framework of “international and humanitarian law,” and have reminded the international community that military force alone is not adequate to address the challenges posed by violent extremism and religious persecution. Pope Francis has argued: “In reaffirming that it is licit, while always respecting international law, to stop an unjust aggressor, I wish to reiterate, moreover, that the problem cannot be resolved solely through a military response.”

The Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) that is currently pending before Congress needs to be placed within this context. The United States should only use military force consistent with “international and humanitarian law.” At the same time, we must deploy other assets in the struggle against terrorism. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. bishops said: “While military action may be necessary, it is by no means sufficient to deal with this terrorist threat.”

Pope Francis maintains, “Fanaticism and fundamentalism ... need to be countered by ... solidarity” that rests “on the following pillars: respect for human life and for religious freedom...; commitment to ensuring what each person requires for a dignified life; and care for the natural environment.”

Political exclusion and economic desperation are manipulated by the self-declared Islamic State. In Syria and Iraq, they exploited the exclusion of Sunnis from governance. Inclusive governance and meaningful participation in political and economic life inoculate populations against the false promises of extremism.

We are grateful for the way the United States has worked with Iraqi officials to encourage the formation of an inclusive government in Iraq that respects human rights and religious freedom for all. Although Iraqis still face challenges in this regard, the task of building inclusive governance remains essential. The same must be done in Syria and Libya. We are also grateful for the humanitarian assistance that our nation has provided to those fleeing violence and persecution, but more must be done.

One of us, as Chair of our International Committee, recently led a solidarity visit on behalf of our Conference of Bishops to the Kurdish region of Iraq where hundreds of thousands of Syrians and Iraqis, including Christians, Yezidis and Muslims, have fled the terror of the “Islamic State” and their homes. They arrive often with only the clothes on their backs. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is working with the local Church to assist the displaced without regard to creed, but the needs are overwhelming. More than one Catholic bishop begged us to urge our government to provide both protection and more humanitarian assistance.

The persistence and magnitude of the displacements is straining host countries and communities, and leading to restrictions on refugees and displaced persons. This urgent mega-crisis requires scaling up development assistance to host countries and communities that are struggling to provide employment opportunities, education and health services to both their local populations and displaced persons. In addition, it is important to deliver both humanitarian and development assistance through trusted NGOs, including faith-based organizations like CRS, who are focused on displaced populations.

Our delegation to Iraq also met with some very vulnerable refugees and displaced Syrians and Iraqis who will not be able to return to their homes. Some have health conditions, others have lost a bread winner, and still others are orphaned. The most vulnerable of this population need to have the option of resettlement to a third country. The United States should accept its share of these vulnerable cases.

Attacks on religious and ethnic minorities are attacks on the health of an entire society. Violence may begin against minorities, but it often does not end there. The rights of all Syrians, Iraqis, Libyans and others in the region are at risk from the current situation. Our nation must do more to protect civilians, especially religious minorities, to address political and economic exclusion that extremists exploit, and to assist refugees and internally displaced persons who have fled for their lives.

Sincerely yours,



Most Reverend Joseph E. Kurtz, D.D.
Archbishop of Louisville
President
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops



Most Reverend Oscar Cantú
Bishop of Las Cruces
Chairman, Committee on International
Justice and Peace