



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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March 4, 2014

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators,


As Chair of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I write to urge your support for 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.

The survival of Christian communities in the Middle East is under threat but many other religious minorities also face egregious violence, 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 killed hundreds of Muslims and left thousands homeless. Following such attacks, 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. On June 8, 2013, Pope Francis said, "In the world today freedom of religion is often talked about rather than put into practice. ... The serious affronts inflicted on this primary right are a source of grave concern.... One and all are duty bound to defend religious freedom and to promote it for everyone. The shared protection of this moral good is also a guarantee of the entire community's growth and development."

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 urge you to support to passage of S. 653 and advance international religious freedom.

Sincerely yours,

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Most Reverend Richard E. Pates

Bishop of Des Moines

Chair, Committee on International Justice and Peace