



Department of Social Development and World Peace

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November 1, 2007

The Honorable Dr. Condoleezza Rice
Secretary of State
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Rice:

On behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I write to express profound concerns regarding the difficult situation involving our nation, the international community and Iran. The prospect of Iran developing nuclear weapons is unacceptable. Iran has threatened its neighbors, especially Israel, and contributes to the widespread instability of the region. There has been an escalation in both rhetoric and confrontation between the United States and Iran.

However, based on the Church's teaching on war and peace, we welcome your recent statement that the United States and other nations "remain fully committed to a diplomatic solution with Iran." As Pope Benedict XVI stated: "Concerning the international crises linked to nuclear power, may an honorable solution be found for all parties, through serious and honest negotiations...."

Recent news accounts speculating on the possible use of force against Iran are especially troubling. From a moral perspective, in the absence of an immediate threat against the United States or our allies, military action would constitute an act of preventive war. The Catholic Church teaches: "[E]ngaging in a preventive war without clear proof that an attack is imminent cannot fail to raise serious moral and juridical questions." (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 501) The use of force must always be a last resort. In addition, the failure to be transparent about one's nuclear energy program is not grounds for military intervention, nor is the possession of nuclear weapons or the issuing of bellicose statements.

People have a right to security and peace. Nuclear weapons are indiscriminant tools of war and their use violates the norms of just war. Unfortunately, Iran continues to ignore its international responsibilities. Its leaders have stridently and openly resisted efforts to bring Iran into compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Safeguards Agreement. Such resistance undermines the stability of the region and the pursuit of nuclear non-proliferation.

The case of Iran is serious, but not unique. Iran is an example of the significant threat posed to global security by a proliferation of nuclear weapons. The specific situation of Iran should be viewed within the wider search for a just and peaceful world order built on nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament.

Iran should comply with its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and fully cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in the development of its nuclear energy program. The United States should pursue efforts to ensure Iran's compliance, but how our nation pursues this goal is an important question both practically and morally. The United States ought to engage in direct and sustained diplomacy with Iran in collaboration with international partners. Dialogue is essential. It is not a reward for good behavior, but rather is a means to achieve important ends. The Administration's agreement with North Korea, which our Conference and others publicly recognized, demonstrates the value of diplomacy.

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Before military options could be considered, all possible alternatives, especially incentive programs for Iran to engage in diplomacy and cooperate with IAEA policies, would have to be exhausted. For example, the United States could consider offering security guarantees that it will not attack Iran. In coordination with other nuclear powers, it could supply Iran with nuclear fuel for peaceful uses, and could consider opening up more economic opportunities in the world economy for Iran.

From a moral perspective, economic sanctions should be carefully targeted so as not to impact the most vulnerable civilians. From a practical perspective, the use of sanctions ought to be continuously evaluated for their effectiveness and impact, e.g. the possibility that sanctions will strengthen public support for the current regime in Iran.

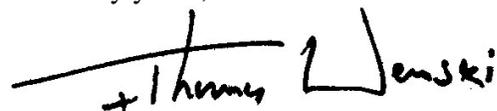
While the prospect of a nuclear armed Iran is dangerous, Iran is not an immediate nuclear threat. Many experts insist that Iran is years away from developing a usable nuclear weapon. For this reason, discussing or promoting military options at this time is unwise and may be counterproductive. Actual or threatened military strikes are likely to strengthen the regime in power in Iran and would further marginalize those in Iran who want to abide by international norms. Emphasizing the military option sows doubts about the seriousness of our nation's commitment to negotiations in the minds of Iranians and allies alike. And, as the experience of in Iraq teaches, the use of force can have unintended consequences.

Finally, our nation should strengthen our credibility on this issue, and possibly our leverage, by changing the U.S. nuclear posture policy to ensure that nuclear weapons would not be used against non-nuclear threats and, longer term, by making more sustained progress on nuclear disarmament. A morally responsible nonproliferation strategy must be tied to a clear strategy for reducing and ultimately ending the reliance on nuclear weapons by any country. The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty itself ties nonproliferation to eventual nuclear disarmament.

Our Conference of Bishops has said: "An active commitment by the United States to nuclear disarmament and the strengthening of collective security is the only moral basis for temporarily retaining our deterrent and our insistence that other nations forego these weapons. We advocate disarmament by example: careful but clear steps to reduce and end our dependence on weapons of mass destruction."

Secretary Rice, we want to recognize and welcome your declaration that the United States "remain(s) fully committed to a diplomatic solution with Iran." For the sake of our nation and the world, we pray that efforts by you and others to reduce the threat of nuclear proliferation will be successful.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas Wenski". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "T" and "W".

Most Rev. Thomas G. Wenski
Bishop of Orlando
Chairman, Committee on International Policy