



Department of Social Development and World Peace

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October 26, 2006

The Honorable Condoleezza Rice
Secretary of State
Department of State
2201 C. Street, N.W.
Room 7327
Washington, DC 20520

BY FAX: (202)-647-9572

Dear Madame Secretary:

On behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I am writing to you to express our deep concern and growing alarm at the rapidly deteriorating situation of Christians and other religious minorities in Iraq.

We deplore the sectarian violence engulfing the Shia and Sunni communities in Iraq. We are especially and acutely aware of the deliberate violence perpetrated against Christians and other vulnerable minorities. Christians continue to decline from a pre-war population of over 1.2 million to a current estimate of about 600,000. The growing and deliberate targeting of Christians is an ominous sign of the breakdown in Iraqi society of civil order and interreligious respect and represents a grave violation of human rights and religious liberty.

The recent beheading of a Syriac Orthodox priest in Mosul, the crucifixion of a Christian teenager in Albasra, the frequent kidnappings for ransom of Christians including four priests--one of whom was the secretary of Patriarch Delly, the rape of Christian women and teenage girls, and the bombings of churches are all indicators that the situation has reached a crisis point. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees estimates that approximately 44% of Iraqi refugees are Christian, even though they represent only about 4% of the total population of Iraq. While thousands have fled to Syria, Jordan and Turkey, the remainder in Iraq are increasingly leading lives of desperation. Many no longer feel safe gathering in churches and Christian institutions, resulting in the closing of parishes, seminaries and convents. Others are fleeing to the north of Iraq in search of some measure of safety and sanctuary.

The vulnerability of Christians and other religious minorities is dramatic evidence of the serious and growing security challenges facing the entire nation of Iraq. Efforts must continue to end all sectarian violence and to make Iraq secure for everyone. At the same time, we also urge you to take several specific measures to improve the particular security situation of Christians and other minorities in Iraq. First, we hope that the U.S. government will consider the creation of a new "Administrative Region" in the Nineveh Plain Area that would be directly related to the central government in Baghdad. This could provide Christians and other minorities with greater safety and offer more opportunity to control their own affairs with assistance from the central government. Since the Kurds are key to any real efforts to stabilize Iraq and many Christians

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and other minorities are fleeing to the north of Iraq, we ask that the U.S. government work with Kurdish authorities to ensure the safety of Christians in the Plain of Nineveh and to provide adequate protection and assistance for religious minorities in areas controlled directly by the Kurds.

We also believe that an urgent review of economic reconstruction aid programs is needed to make sure that the aid is distributed fairly so that all elements of Iraqi society are able to rebuild their communities. Finally, we urge the U.S. government to adopt a more generous refugee and asylum policy, including the possible resettlement of at-risk cases to the United States, and to work with the governments of Turkey, Jordan and Syria to grant visas to allow Iraqi Christians and others compelled to leave Iraq access to economic, health and other necessary assistance and help until they are able to stabilize their own situation, return to Iraq or make other plans for their future.

Thank you for your attention to this important concern. We would be happy to meet with you to discuss this urgent and dangerous situation further.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas Wenski". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the beginning.

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