



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Religious Persecution and Discrimination January 2016

“In the face of such unjust aggression, which also strikes Christians and other ethnic and religious groups in the region – the Yazidis for example – a unanimous response is needed, one which, within the framework of international law, can end the spread of acts of violence, restore harmony and heal the deep wounds which the ongoing conflicts have caused.”

--Pope Francis, Address to Diplomatic Corps, 12 January 2015

BACKGROUND: The persecution of Christians and other religious minorities, particularly in Syria and Iraq, but also in other areas of the world, has been much in the news. Images of refugees washing ashore on beaches in Greece, huddled in train stations and makeshift camps in the Balkans, and clamoring for food and shelter as temperatures drop, have filled the media. Fences have been erected at many borders as political leaders, especially those in Europe, debate how to cope with massive numbers of migrants flooding in, searching for safety and a future without fear. And to make things worse, the terrorist attacks in the Middle East, Paris and San Bernardino, claimed by ISIS, have made many people in many nations, including the United States, fearful of taking in refugees lest extremists be hidden in their midst.

The United Nations estimated that in the month of October alone, 218,000 people crossed the Mediterranean to Europe – a record number. In June, the UN refugee agency reported that the number of refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced had risen to 59.5 million, 8 million more than the previous year. Much of the increase is due to war in Syria that has displaced 7.6 million internally and 3.9 million into surrounding countries, overwhelming those populations.

Aid to the Church in Need recently issued its Religious Freedom Report covering the period October 2012 to summer 2014. Their findings were that “global religious freedom entered a period of serious decline.” Out of 196 countries, the report found religious freedom is significantly impaired in 81, and deteriorating in 55 of those countries. The report designated 20 countries as experiencing the most problems related to religious freedom (in 14, religious persecution is linked to an extremist version of Islam and in another 6, it is linked to authoritarian regimes.) Countries with the most serious religious freedom violations tended to be Muslim-majority nations. According to the report, the persecution of long-established religious minorities by extremists, who purportedly want to establish a caliphate, has led to the wholesale displacement of thousands, contributing to the worldwide refugee crisis. As the report says, “religiously-inspired terror is not only widespread but is on the increase.”

In a recent meeting with the Chaldean Church, Pope Francis decried the “fanatical hatred sown by terrorism, which continues to cause a great hemorrhage of faithful who leave the lands of their fathers.... This state of affairs clearly undermines the vital Christian presence in that land.” He called on the international community “to adopt every useful strategy aimed at bringing peace to countries terribly devastated by hatred, so that the life-giving breeze of love will once more be felt in places which have always been a crossroads for peoples, cultures and nations.”

While emigration affects everyone, it has affected Christian groups and other ethnic and religious minorities disproportionately as they are particularly vulnerable to attack. The bishops in the region blame the U.S. invasion of Iraq as causing chaos for Christians in the region. Church leaders throughout the region have expressed concern that the Christian population is emigrating at alarming rates and could dwindle to a point where their unique cultures, dating back over 2,000 years, will be lost. These ancient

Christian communities make vibrant contributions to their societies; the loss of their presence would be harmful for all. As Pope Francis said, “A Middle East without Christians would be a marred and mutilated Middle East! In urging the international community not to remain indifferent in the face of this situation, I express my hope that religious, political and intellectual leaders ... will condemn all fundamentalist and extremist interpretations of religion which attempt to justify such acts of violence.”

What can be done to stem this tide of violence against religious minorities? What can be done to restore a modicum of security so people do not feel compelled to flee for their lives? What can be done to provide sufficient opportunities so people believe they can remain in communities where their ancestors have lived for generations?

The answer may lie in how we as a nation and Church deal with “fanatical hatred sown by terrorism.” In late October 2015, at the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, Pope Francis noted “an attitude of suspicion or even condemnation of religions has spread” due to violence and terrorism. Recognizing that no religion is “immune to the risk of deviations of a fundamentalist or extremist nature,” the Holy Father said it was necessary to focus on the positive values that religions espouse. He called for respectful interreligious dialogue that can lead to friendship and cooperation in many fields, working toward the common good. In December 2015, Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, USCCB President, admonished us to “confront the extremist threat with courage and compassion, recognizing that Christianity, Islam, Judaism and many other religions are united in opposition to violence carried out in their name” and advocated for “people facing religious discrimination, including our Muslim brothers and sisters.”

USCCB POSITION: USCCB is addressing the complex challenges facing those in the Cradle of Christianity by making religious freedom for all a high priority within policy deliberations. In letters and Congressional testimony, USCCB has echoed the calls of the Holy See to protect those living in Iraq and Syria threatened by ISIS, especially religious and ethnic minorities, and to provide humanitarian assistance for the most vulnerable, including Christians. Pope Francis has denounced the persecution, torture and killing of Christians in the Middle East as “a form of genocide” that must end. USCCB has met with groups representing Iraqi Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities in the region. Earlier this year Bishop Oscar Cantú, Chair of USCCB Committee on International Justice and Peace, urged “the U.S. government to adopt five key policies in response to the rise of ISIL and religious persecution in the Middle East:

1. Confront the reality of religious persecution in the Middle East, where Christians are beheaded “for the mere fact of being Christians” and other religious minorities suffer similarly at the hands of extremists;
2. Recognize that it may be necessary for the international community to use proportionate and discriminate force to stop these unjust aggressors and to protect religious minorities and civilians within the framework of “international and humanitarian law;”
3. Acknowledge that the problem cannot be resolved solely through a military response and that it is critical to address political exclusion and economic desperation that are being manipulated by ISIL in its recruitment efforts, especially in Syria and Iraq;
4. Scale up humanitarian and development assistance to host countries and trusted NGOs, including our own Catholic Relief Services, that are struggling to aid displaced persons; and
5. Accept for resettlement a fair share of some of the most vulnerable people where return is impossible.”

USCCB has also been promoting interreligious dialogue to promote protection of Christians and religious minorities in the Middle East and to counter discrimination against Muslims in our own country.

ACTION REQUESTED: Support the persecuted in the Mideast through donations, advocacy, and prayers. Urge Congress to support H.Con.Res.75 that declares the persecutions as "war crimes", "crimes against humanity", and "genocide".

RESOURCES: Visit <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/international-religious-freedom.cfm>. Contact: Virginia Farris, Policy Advisor, Office of International Justice and Peace, 202-541-3182 or vfarris@usccb.org.