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Christian Minorities Under Attack:
Iraq and Egypt
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Mr. Chairman, Members of Congress, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on the worsening plight of Christian minorities in Iraq and Egypt.

The October 31 violent siege of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church in Baghdad, Iraq during Sunday mass and the New Year's Day bombing attack against Coptic Christians emerging from a church service in Alexandria, Egypt, sent shock waves around the world.

But for those of us here in this room, these horrific atrocities did not occur in a vacuum. In Egypt, for the past two years, we've seen a dramatic upsurge in attacks against Copts, while in Iraq, churches have been targeted at least since 2004, and while the violence in the country has decreased overall, attacks against the Christians have increased. This fall, an al Qaeda group has explicitly linked the Christian communities of Iraq and Egypt in its threats to kill Christians.

Clearly, the governments of both nations have failed to ensure the right to freedom of religion or belief, especially for religious minorities, including Christian communities which have been in Egypt and Iraq for nearly two thousand years.

Speaking for USCIRF, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom on which I serve as a Commissioner, we believe that the United States and the community of nations have a fundamental obligation to address the violence and protect those religious minorities.

Egypt

In Egypt, USCIRF has found serious, widespread, and long-standing human rights violations against religious minorities, as well as disfavored Muslims. Confronted by these violations, the Egyptian government has failed to take the necessary steps to halt the discrimination and repression against Christians and other minorities. Too often, it has failed to punish the violators. This failure to mete out justice continues to foster a climate of impunity, making further attacks likely.

For many years, Egypt's only response to the murder, and even to massacres, of Christians has been to conduct "reconciliation" sessions between Muslims and Christians in order to ease tensions and resolve disputes. This response is problematic and disturbing. In its 2009 annual human rights report on Egypt, the State Department concluded that these sessions not only "prevented the prosecution of perpetrators of crimes against Copts and precluded their recourse

to the judicial system for restitution,” but also “contributed to a climate of impunity that encouraged further assaults.”

The New Year’s Day bombing in Alexandria -- the worst sectarian attack targeting Christians in a decade -- led to President Obama’s call to bring the attackers “to justice for this barbaric and heinous act.” USCIRF calls on the Administration to follow through on the President’s words and press Cairo to hold all those who were involved accountable.

Following the bombing, USCIRF urged Egypt to take visible steps to protect Coptic places of worship before, during, and after the Coptic Christmas of January 7. The Egyptian government heeded our call and Christmas came and went without incident.

However, we must not forget that on the eve of last year’s Coptic Christmas, a drive-by shooting in Naga Hammadi killed six Christians and a Muslim guard. While we commend the recent verdict handed down earlier this week against one of the three alleged perpetrators, since 2008, there have been dozens of violent attacks against Coptic Christians.

These attacks, again, are not happening in a vacuum. The context is a government that has failed to make the rights of religious minorities a priority. Worse, Egypt’s government-controlled media and government-funded mosques have engaged in incitement to violence.

In recent months, Egyptian officials have spoken out against this incitement to violence, and temporarily shut down several satellite TV stations, including Al-Nas and Al-Rahma. But as Egypt’s presidential elections approach, more must be done to protect religious minority communities and prosecute those who assault their members.

Since 2002, Egypt has been on USCIRF’s Watch List. Our Watch List includes countries whose religious freedom violations are serious enough to warrant close monitoring but not quite as serious to be characterized as “systematic, ongoing, and egregious,” which is the threshold for being designated a “country of particular concern” or a CPC.

Given the worsening religious freedom conditions in Egypt, and, with few exceptions, the country’s repeated failure to address the climate of impunity and otherwise adjust its own laws to ensure that people understand the need to respect the freedom of religion or belief of all persons, USCIRF will undertake a thorough and searching review of whether Egypt now meets the criteria for designation as a CPC. This designation, if made by the United States government, would be a very serious matter. Once a country is designated a CPC, the President is required – in the absence of special circumstances – to take specific actions against that nation, as specified in the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. These actions can include economic or other sanctions, travel bans on government officials connected with religious freedom violations, and various limitations on aid and other foreign assistance.

The United States should urge Egypt to discontinue the counterproductive “reconciliation” sessions as a bypass for promptly investigating violence against Copts and other vulnerable religious minorities, vigorously bringing the perpetrators to justice, while compensating the

victims. In addition, the Egyptian government should heighten security at Christian and other non-Muslim places of worship, particularly in the current climate where religious minorities are increasingly vulnerable to extremist attacks.

Equally important, the U.S. should urge the Egyptian government to address incitement to violence and discrimination against both Muslims and non-Muslims by ending government subsidies and licenses to media and religious institutions that incite to violence; prosecuting clerics and other who incite violence; dismissing or disciplining those employed or sponsored by the government espousing intolerance; publicly and officially repudiating such incitement and discrimination no matter its source; and rescinding any prior fatwas issued by Al-Azhar that discriminate or incite violence against any Muslim or non-Muslim religious minority communities.

Iraq

While USCIRF considers recommending a CPC designation for Egypt, it has continued to recommend that designation since 2008 for Iraq.

The plight of Iraq's smallest religious minorities, including Christians and also Sabeen Mandeans, and Yazidis, remains a desperate one. Victimized by discrimination, marginalization, displacement and violence, they do not receive adequate protection and justice from the state and lack the militia or tribal structures necessary to defend themselves in the absence of government protection. As a result, Christians and other small religious minorities have been emigrating in mass numbers, while those remaining in Iraq fear for their safety.

In one sense, the attacks launched against Christians resemble the continued atrocities against Iraq's Shi'a Muslims. The culprits are largely the same – Sunni extremists. The difference is in the goal of these attacks. The purpose of the attacks against the Shi'a majority is to trigger a civil war and bring down the government. But the goal of the attacks against Iraq's non-Muslim minorities is to isolate their members and rid the nation of their presence. Speaking after the October 31 attack on Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Wijdan Michael, Iraq's human rights minister and herself a Christian, summed it up perfectly when she said it was an attempt “to empty Iraq of Christians.”

This brutal, unrelenting campaign of religious cleansing began in August 2004, when five churches were bombed in Baghdad and Mosul. On a single day in July 2009, 7 churches were bombed in a coordinated attack in Baghdad. Christian clergy and other leaders have been targeted, including Paulos Rahho, the Archbishop of Mosul, who was kidnapped and killed in early 2008. Last May, a bus convoy of Christian students traveling to their university in Mosul was violently assaulted. During these terrible years, Christians from every walk of life have been raped, tortured, kidnapped, beheaded, and evicted from their homes.

In 2003, there were at least 800,000 and as many as 1.4 million Christians living in Iraq; it is now estimated that only half of that community remains in the country.

Since the October 31 attack which caught the world's attention, the violence has continued. Just a few days later, bomb and mortar attacks were launched against Christian homes in Baghdad, killing at least 5 and injuring 30. On December 30, 10 more bomb attacks targeted Christian areas in that city, killing 2 and wounding 20. These latest attacks have led to further waves of Christians fleeing Baghdad and Mosul.

What has Iraq done in response to the existential threat to its Christian minority community?

Following the October 31 church attack, senior officials, including Prime Minister al Maliki, President Talabani, and KRG President Barzani, as well as two prominent Shi'a leaders, promptly condemned the atrocity. Moreover, individual suspects have been arrested. Since the October 31 attack, the government has also increased security at churches and in Christian areas.

While USCIRF applauds these actions, it strongly recommends that the U.S. government put more pressure on Iraq to make sure that the guilty parties are prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

Further, it recommends that the U.S. and Iraqi governments -- in consultation with Christian and other religious minority communities -- upgrade security, identifying vulnerable targets for terrorists and implementing a plan for Iraqi military protection of these areas. The U.S. and Iraq should also work to establish, fund, train, and deploy local police units to provide additional protection.

We also recommend that the U.S. do more to ensure that its developmental assistance programming prioritizes areas where vulnerable religious communities are concentrated, including the Nineveh Plains area.

Finally, we urge the U.S. government to engage in speedy processing of vulnerable Iraqi refugees who wish to be resettled in the United States, in part by ensuring that there are enough people to conduct background and screening procedures in a timely manner, and that the existing waiver of the material support bar is properly applied to individuals forced to provide support to terrorists under duress.

CONCLUSION

In the case of both countries – Egypt and Iraq – we are talking about allies of the United States, governments with which we have strong relationships and to which we give billions of dollars in aid annually. It is time to act decisively on behalf of the fundamental human right of freedom of religion or belief, especially for religious minorities, including Christians.

Not only is this a moral imperative, but Congress should understand that this is good for security – our security, the security of both nations, and global security.

Moreover, the continued threat against the Christian communities of both countries undermines an important moderating influence in the region.

Finally, in the case of Iraq, we have a special obligation to render our assistance while our presence remains in that nation. The transition from dictatorship to political democracy must include the protection of religious freedom.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.