

Bishop appeals to US to end violence against Iraqi Christians

WASHINGTON – The chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace has asked the Obama administration to ensure that the Iraqi government takes steps to protect minorities, especially Christians, in the embattled country.

In a March 1 letter to Gen. James L. Jones, national security adviser, Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany, N.Y., expressed "deep concern" for a recent upsurge in violence that has targeted Iraqi Christians and other minorities.

"We ask that the U.S. government convey to the Iraqi government its strong concern for the need to provide security for all Iraqis and to protect the human dignity of all minorities, especially Christians," Bishop Hubbard wrote.

Bishop Hubbard cited the deaths of eight Christians in a 10-day period in February in the northern city of Mosul as a cause for concern for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The violence in Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, also displaced 4,320 Iraqi Christians in February, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported March 2. Many of the Christians have relocated to disputed territory in neighboring eastern Ninewa province.

The rise in violence comes as Iraq prepares for March 7 elections. While much of the violence has been secular in nature, observers said the elections offer an opportunity for religiously motivated violence to occur as well.

Bishop Hubbard's letter coincided with appeals from several church leaders in Iraq for assistance. Archbishop Louis Sako of Kirkuk and Chaldean Bishop Emil Shimoun Nona of Mosul have called for humanitarian emergency relief to help those who abandoned their homes for safety elsewhere.

In addition, Pope Benedict XVI and Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, papal nuncio in

Iraq, called upon the Iraqi government in late February to end the violence and to protect the minority Christian population.