

Bishops join call for US to support long-term development in Iraq

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has joined a broad group of religious, justice, and relief and development organizations in calling upon President Barack Obama to assist and protect vulnerable Iraqis and pursue efforts that lead to long-term development in war-torn Iraq.

In a March 4 letter to the White House, 44 organizations asked the president to mandate that “civilian agencies take the lead in formulating and implementing an effective humanitarian and development strategy.”

Stephen Colecchi, director of the U.S. bishops’ Office of International Justice and Peace, said the letter’s call parallels one aspect of the U.S. bishops’ 2006 statement seeking a responsible transition in Iraq and the eventual withdrawal of American military forces from the country.

A key to Iraq’s development is creating a stable country where all Iraqis are safe and refugees – both Christian and non-Christian – can return to their communities, Mr. Colecci told Catholic News Service March 9.

“Iraq still has very high levels of unemployment and that is never good for the stability of the country. High levels of unemployment tend to correlate with instability in societies and so economic and humanitarian development assistance is more than just assistance; it’s also building peace,” Colecchi said.

The two-page letter urged Obama to ask Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to lead an interagency effort within the federal government to develop a strategy that includes goals for humanitarian efforts and human development as well as ways to measure how those goals are being met.

The organizations placed particular emphasis on establishing programs that would allow Iraq’s 2.5 million refugees and another 2 million internally displaced people to return to their communities and live in safety. The letter also sought aid for Iraq’s neighboring countries where refugees have fled and a commitment to resettle the

most vulnerable Iraqi refugees in the United States.

“We’re particularly concerned about the Christian community that has been particularly hard hit both internally within Iraq and in the region. That’s a symptom of pain all Iraqis are feeling,” Mr. Colecchi said.

In 2006 Bishop Thomas G. Wenski of Orlando, Fla., then chairman of the bishops’ Committee on International Justice and Peace, called for bipartisan cooperation in the United States to achieve a responsible transition to end the war and the withdrawal of U.S. armed forces as early as possible consistent with that goal.

The bishops’ criteria for such a transition included:

- Minimizing the loss of life.
- Addressing the humanitarian crisis in Iraq and the refugee crisis.
- Promoting political reconciliation in Iraq.
- Engaging international support, especially with Syria and Iran, to stabilize Iraq.

Other organizations that signed the March 4 letter include Catholic Relief Services; Pax Christi USA; the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns; Network, a Catholic social justice lobby; the Chaldean Federation of America; the Episcopal Church; the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society.

The full text of the letter can be found online at

[www.networklobby.org/issues/200920Issue20Agenda/IraqLetterToPresident04March0920\(2\).pdf](http://www.networklobby.org/issues/200920Issue20Agenda/IraqLetterToPresident04March0920(2).pdf).