

Sen. Cardin meets with Md. religious leaders

In his first official assembly with Maryland religious leaders, Sen. Ben Cardin laid out his vision for the war in Iraq, immigration reform, peace intervention in the Holy Land and national health coverage, and set up a process to confer with the group on a regular basis.

The newly elected Democratic senator - who recently returned from a congressional tour of the Middle East - told the Central Maryland Ecumenical during a June 11 meeting in Baltimore he shared their frustration with the war in Iraq and was working on a strategy to bring U.S. troops home from the region.

Members of Central Maryland Ecumenical have vigorously opposed continued U.S. involvement in Iraqi combat.

"It's been a tragedy," Sen. Cardin said. "The focus America has had on Iraq has led to the exclusion of other troubling spots in the world, and the loss of life has been devastating."

The senator - like a majority of his colleagues in the U.S. Congress - supports shifting responsibility of Iraq's security to that country's political leaders and military, and to slowly withdraw American troops.

President George W. Bush has rejected any calls for a scheduled exit, asserting that such a move would be viewed as surrender and would produce chaos and civil war. The president's critics consider Iraq already engulfed in a full-scale civil war.

Pope Benedict XVI "called some time ago for an honest discussion about what has been gained by this intervention," said Bishop Denis J. Madden, urban vicar and the Catholic representative at the June 11 meeting. "How much better off are the people in Iraq now, and is our presence beneficial to them?"

Bishop Madden agreed continued U.S. involvement makes it difficult for political leaders to focus on the enduring strife between Israelis and Palestinians, and was

jubilant when Sen. Cardin agreed to throw his support behind American peace initiatives.

His recent tour of troubled areas in Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian region reinforced the senator's resolve that U.S. intervention is needed to find a way for Israelis and Palestinians to harmoniously coexist.

Though Sen. Cardin's visit to the Palestinian region could be viewed by fellow Jews as disloyalty to the Israeli people, Bishop Madden viewed the pilgrimage as an even-handed approach to resolving a humanitarian crisis for people of all faiths in the region.

"Sen. Cardin certainly wants security for the Jews in Israel, but he is also sensitive to the needs of the Palestinian community," he said. "This was encouraging to hear."

With the immigration reform bill stalling in Congress, the senator told religious leaders he would work for legislation that would focus more on family unification among immigrants, measures that would allow illegal aliens to come out of the shadows and stronger border security.

"There is also a need for universal (health care) coverage," Sen. Cardin said. "I would like to pass a bill that would require more companies to provide health insurance. That is where I think we should start."

Central Maryland Ecumenical comprises Christian leaders from Catholic and Protestant faiths, but the group also invited Jewish and Muslim representatives to its meeting with the senator.

Sen. Cardin - who was a Maryland representative in the U.S. House for many years before his election to the Senate last fall - wants to meet with the group on a regular basis.

"The faith community can help us a great deal," he said. "They have a significant audience. They can get the word out and clear up a lack of understanding with a lot of these complicated bills."