

U.S. cardinal says he hopes U.S. will admit more Iraqi refugees

WASHINGTON - The retired archbishop of Washington said he hopes the United States will admit more refugees from Iraq.

“The United States is starting to receive” refugees from Iraq, but “I hope they will accept more,” Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick told Catholic News Service July 13 in a telephone interview from Beirut, Lebanon, where he was touring Middle Eastern host countries of Iraqi refugees.

He was part a delegation that included Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, N.Y., officials from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the International Catholic Migration Commission and the U.S. bishops’ Catholic Relief Services. Cardinal McCarrick and Bishop DiMarzio are consultants to the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Migration.

The delegation began its tour in Istanbul, Turkey, July 2; Cardinal McCarrick joined the group in Amman, Jordan, July 9. The delegation also visited Syria.

Cardinal McCarrick said he “realized how many Iraqi citizens have left the country and are looking for a place to live.”

A survey released July 11 from the nonprofit, private U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants reported that for the second consecutive year Iraq was the source of the most new refugees worldwide.

While the United States has admitted fewer than 800 Iraqi refugees for resettlement since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, in 2006 Syria admitted 449,000, Jordan 250,000 and Egypt 79,800, the report said. Lebanon became the host country for 13,200 Iraqi refugees last year, it said.

Describing the state of Iraqi refugees as “a real man-made disaster” and “emergency situation,” Cardinal McCarrick expressed concern over two groups of Iraqi refugees:

Christians and those who have worked with the U.S. military or government, putting their lives in danger.

The cardinal spoke about the “unusually large number” of Iraqi Christian refugees, some of whom left Iraq because they were threatened that they must convert to Islam or be killed by extremists.

“Many of the Muslim families will probably return to Iraq,” the cardinal said, noting that “Christian families will not return” if Christians are not welcome.

“We are losing the Christians’ presence,” he told CNS.

Cardinal McCarrick said he spoke with Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad July 12 about the importance of continuing the education of young Iraqi refugees. The president said Syrian officials were aware of the need, “and it troubles them, too,” Cardinal McCarrick said.

The cardinal, who is also a member of the U.S. bishops’ international policy committee and the board of Catholic Relief Services, said he plans to talk to his contacts in the U.S. State Department and Congress about what he saw and learned during his trip.

The cardinal said he met with Iraqi refugee families, who live with other families in private homes.

“They do the best they can” to try to keep the family together, he said.

In a neighborhood of Beirut, Cardinal McCarrick met a 14-year-old girl who was working “because she had to bring money into the family,” he told CNS. “The stories are all the same; they are doing the best they can” to keep the family together.