



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development
Office of International Justice and Peace

International Religious Freedom: Justice for the Persecuted
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“In the face of such unjust aggression, which also strikes Christians and other ethnic and religious groups in the region – the Yazidis for example – a unanimous response is needed, one which, within the framework of international law, can end the spread of acts of violence, restore harmony and heal the deep wounds which the ongoing conflicts have caused.”

--Pope Francis, Address to Diplomatic Corps, 12 January 2015

BACKGROUND

Global religious freedom is under siege. According to a Pew Research Center report, over 75 percent of the world's population live in countries with high or very high governmental and/or societal restrictions on religious freedom. Political/economic disputes over power and access to resources/land/property are often framed in religious terms. All these fuel unrest and conflict.

Much attention has been focused on treatment of Christians, Yazidis, and others in Syria and Iraq. The Islamic State (ISIS) had rampaged, killing many, forcing women and girls into sexual servitude, causing thousands to flee or be forcibly converted. ISIS also attacked many Shiites and even Sunnis who opposed ISIS rule. Millions were internally displaced, some multiple times, and migrants and refugees flooded into neighboring countries. Lebanon, with its population of 4 million, is hosting over 1 million Syrians. Together with Jordan and Turkey, these countries struggle to provide resources for the huge influx of refugees, in addition to caring for their own citizens. Refugees also pressed onward to Europe, overcrowding flimsy boats and several tragically dying in the process. An anti-immigrant backlash and instances of violence against religious minorities increased. Extremist political parties seeking to curtail immigration of religious and ethnic minorities, or suppress religious groups, have gained power in some countries. While ISIS has been diminished, the causes and long-term effects of their rise and attempt to establish a caliphate will continue to stoke religiously-motivated conflict.

Throughout the region, Church leaders - from Jerusalem to Iraq - have expressed concern that the Christian population is emigrating at alarming rates. Some fear that the Christian indigenous presence will dwindle and that their unique cultures, dating back over 2,000 years, will be lost. The very birthplace of Christianity now faces the serious threat of losing its Christian heritage because of the systematic violence and instability so many Christians experience in their homeland. Chaos after the Iraq war, poor governance and conflicts in the Middle East have created an environment where dignity is not respected and far too many have endured human rights abuses. Christians and other innocent victims of violence in Iraq, Syria, Gaza and beyond are struggling to survive and live with dignity in dire conditions. The Israeli occupation in the West Bank has choked the hopes and opportunities for Christian families that many have been forced to migrate.

But abuse of religious freedom or discrimination couched in religious terms is evident in other parts of the world. In Myanmar, burning of villages, systematic rape of women and killings by Myanmar military and Buddhist hardliners led over 700,000 Rohingya Muslims to flee across the border into Bangladesh where they remain stuck in overcrowded camps, prone to flooding and the spread of disease. Myanmar denies the Rohingya citizenship so they are considered stateless. Bangladesh, itself a poor country, would like to repatriate the Rohingya but they are reluctant to return without guarantees of their safety and of their ability to claim basic rights.

In places like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia, overt bias towards one religion means minorities face discrimination in education, employment, housing, as well as more violent abuses. In Nigeria, conflicts between herders and farmers have been framed in religious terms while fighting, killing, and kidnapping by Boko Haram (whose name loosely translates into “Western education is forbidden”) has displaced thousands. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Nicaragua, governments are targeting the Catholic Church because it plays a pivotal role in working for democracy, good governance, and free and fair elections. In Mexico, cartels attack Catholic clergy who denounce criminal activity and protect those who try to free themselves from addiction while government inaction allows a culture of impunity.

The United Nations estimates that 68.5 million people are forcibly displaced worldwide, the highest number on record. Many are displaced due to conflicts, real or manufactured over religion, and 85 percent of those displaced are in developing countries ill equipped to handle this burden. According to the UN High Commission for Refugees, one out of every 113 people in the world is an asylum-seeker, internally displaced or a refugee. These people yearn for safety and justice.

USCCB POSITION: The Church and the USCCB have long supported international religious freedom and made religious freedom for all a high priority in policy deliberations. The Second Vatican Council declared that “the human person has a right to religious freedom” and called upon governments to safeguard that freedom. Religious freedom is viewed as “a cornerstone of the structure of human rights.” In particular, USCCB is addressing the challenges facing those in the Cradle of Christianity, echoing calls by the Holy See to protect those living in Iraq and Syria threatened by ISIS, especially religious and ethnic minorities. Pope Francis denounced the persecution, torture and killing of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East as “a form of genocide” that must end.

USCCB supported legislation like H.R.390, that was signed into law in December 2018 directing humanitarian assistance to those with the greatest need and the most vulnerable, including Christians. USCCB bishops and staff make regular solidarity trips around the world to meet with religious leaders and the many migrants, refugees and internally displaced who are suffering. Here in Washington, USCCB has met with groups representing Iraqi and Syrian Christians, and other religious and ethnic minorities. CRS is on the ground aiding refugees and helping Christians and other religious minorities return to their homes in Iraq and neighboring countries. USCCB’s Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) and Catholic Charities USA resettle the dwindling number of refugees allowed into the United States, including those fleeing from religious persecution.

Summarizing his hopes at an interreligious meeting in October 2018, Pope Francis said, “We desire that men and women of different religions may everywhere gather and promote harmony, especially where there is conflict. ...we are called to free ourselves from the heavy burdens of distrust, fundamentalism and hate.”

RESOURCES: Visit <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/international-religious-freedom.cfm> and <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues/middle-east/christians-in-the-middle-east/index.cfm>