

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (TLHRC) Hearing:

**Christian Minorities Under Attack:
Iraq and Egypt**

Thursday, January 20, 2011

10 a.m. – 12 p.m.

2359 Rayburn HOB

Testimony of an Iraqi Catholic Sister

Thank you Honorable Chairman Wolf and Chairman McGovern for the opportunity to share my testimony before these bodies today. My thanks especially to the Honorable Chris Smith for his invitation.

For purposes of today's testimony I am Sister Rita. I am a Catholic citizen of Iraq and a member of a worldwide order of Catholic Sisters. I've lived in the United States since 2002 and I am currently completing a dual master's degree in pastoral theology and social work in the Midwest. I am protecting my identity, not for myself, but for my loved ones in Iraq.

You invited me to speak to you about the reality on the ground for Iraqi Christians, as I will do. But I cannot speak of the Iraqi Christian reality outside the context of the whole of Iraq. It is safe to say, without a hint of exaggeration, that the trauma of war has imprinted itself on the bodies, minds, and spirits of every Iraqi citizen. We are now a people – 26 million strong – whose identity has been forged more by death, grief, suffering, trauma and pain than by any creed or political ideology. This is the context for the persecution of Iraq's minorities, including the Christians. And whatever our political leanings or theories about the causes of this current persecution, the consequences are a grave threat to the very existence of one of the earliest post-resurrection communities of the disciples of Jesus in the world. It requires the urgent attention of this Congress and the commitment of the international community.

The year 2010 was the most violent for Christians since the war began. Minorities are paying a heavy price because they don't have militias to protect them. Qaraqosh is a Christian village 36 kilometers from Mosul. The parishes of the village had been providing transportation to the students to go to Mosul University. The buses have been attacked multiple times in the past five years. One day there was a bomb stuck to the bottom of one of the buses. When the driver started the engine the bomb exploded and two female students' legs were amputated by the blast. Three others were wounded. Another time a bus was stopped by terrorists and seven young men were kidnapped. The terrorists demanded ransom from the families of the students in order to get their sons back. Despite this, the students kept going to the university.

Then, on May 2 last year, four buses filled with Christian students and teachers were attacked on their way to the university by terrorists using a well-coordinated series of car bombs, roadside IEDs, and weapons fire. The four buses were damaged very badly, and 144 students were injured. About 35 of them, beautiful young women and handsome young men, suffered severe facial disfigurement. One student, 19 year old Sandy, a first year biology major, lay in critical condition in a coma for a week before she died. A medical professional I know works at the hospital where many of the wounded were taken. In the hours after the bombing he returned home twice for a complete change of clothing, so blood-soaked he became while tending to the wounded.

According to witnesses, my cousin among them, when the buses were attacked the students ran from them, looking for help. They found more terror instead, as the perpetrators opened fire on them. My cousin's friends were covered with blood as the bullets sheared off ears, eyes, fingers and legs. She said the victims relied on the kindness of villagers from a Muslim farming community who unloaded their animals from their pick up trucks and transported the students to the closest hospital in dung-crusted flatbeds. "We were sitting on very dirty trucks filled with animal's manure, but we appreciated their help," my cousin told me.

After the attack, the Christian students were threatened by the terrorists who said that the men would be killed and the women would be kidnapped and given to Muslim men to marry. As a result, nearly all Christian students from the villages of Nineveh plain, my cousin among them, stopped going to the university. They stay at home in the villages, where there is no opportunity for higher education or meaningful employment. The religious, priests, and very active groups of lay people work hard in the villages to try to provide activities and education to keep the youth from focusing on the difficulty of their situation. But what will become of them?

There are those who think that creating an autonomous zone for Christians is the answer to the violence. It is possible that they are right. I can't say I know better. But for how long can the Christians live in a closed enclave and continue to be effective contributors to the whole of Iraqi society? This short term, and, to my way of thinking, short-sighted solution will only create more grief and difficulty further down the line because it does not address the root cause of the violence and persecution.

I have returned home to Iraq twice since the invasion. Each time the questions I faced regarding U.S. policy in Iraq have left me speechless, without words to defend this country whose citizens I have come to admire and love as if they were my own.

The Iraqi Christian community has been very patient, working toward and hoping for that new Iraq that would provide the peaceful and secure environment we need to live happy, productive and useful lives in our homeland. Yet year after year our situation has deteriorated. People cannot live healthy, productive lives under this kind of pressure. One of our sisters who works in one of our hospitals in Iraq said she's noticed an increase in the number of women asking for C-sections, not for any medical reason, but because they long for the peace they believe they will experience under anesthesia.

My own uncle says when he leaves his home to go to work, he says Good bye to his family because he doesn't know if he will ever see them again.

Did the parishioners who died while attending Mass at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Deliverance in Baghdad on October 31, 2010, have any sense that they would never see their families again? Members of my own family and the relatives and friends of so many of my religious sisters and brothers, died that day. My cousin and her 13 month-old daughter survived the massacre but her husband and her brother in-law were killed. When the terrorists entered the church Father Thear tried to talk with them, and asked them not to hurt the worshippers. Without saying a word they killed him. Then Fr. Waseem tried to do the same and they killed him. Survivors of the massacre said that after killing the two priests the terrorists started killing all the men in the church. The terrorist shouted at them "Atheists!" and "You are going to Hell." Some people were able to hide in the sacristy, which saved their lives. But at least 54 people were killed, among them the two priests, children in the womb, and a six month old girl, who was, according to witnesses, slaughtered on the altar.

Adam, three years old, saw his father killed in front of him. His aunts who were also in the church witnessed Adam crying out to the terrorists for three hours, “ Enough! Enough! Enough!” until the terrorists killed Adam, too.

My cousin saved her baby by placing her in a cabinet in the room, giving her food, and closing the door. She was worried about whether her daughter would get enough air in there, but it was only way that she knew to protect her. When I spoke with her a few days after the massacre she said that the day after the massacre her daughter woke up crying, looking for her daddy. What will she tell her daughter as she grows into the realization of why Daddy is not with her any more?

Iraqis and Americans can unite our voices with three year old Adam and cry “Enough, Enough!, Enough!” If we, like Adam, had cried out together long ago, with love and respect for the dignity of each person, thousands – hundreds of thousands of people would live today.

You brought me here today to tell my people’s story. Perhaps even now it is difficult for you to grasp the real sense of the words I speak. Does it all seem remote from your everyday experience? Perhaps not, if you have a loved one serving in the U.S. military in Iraq or Afghanistan. Perhaps not, if you recall what happened in Tucson 12 days ago. The terror, confusion, suffering, grief and pain that the people of Tucson experienced – and that you experienced, as you awaited word of your colleague Representative Giffords – is a glimpse at the experience of every Iraqi, whether they live in Iraq, or are counted among the 50,000 or so Iraqi refugees that have arrived in the U.S. since 2008. Or among the 90,000 or so Iraqi-Americans who were either born in the U.S. or emigrated here before the current refugee crisis. Yes, there may be 8,000 miles separating our geography, but the hearts of Americans and the hearts of Iraqis are much closer together than that. Americans – U.S. citizens or those on the path to citizenship – are the brothers and sisters, children and parents, grandchildren and the grandparents, the aunts and uncles and cousins of those who are dying everyday in Iraq. What is the cost of this violence?

It is my hope that greater minds than mine are working on this very question. It is my hope that your invitation to me to be here today shows we can not do this alone. The people of Iraq need the U.S. to fulfill its moral obligation to help repair the damage that the war has caused. And we need a stable, secure home, where we can begin to heal the wounds of trauma that are the most intimate, painful, and destructive consequences of this disastrous conflict.

My Iraqi religious community ministers among the remnant of Iraq’s Christians. We continue to believe that there is reason to hope for a better future for the country. In spite of all, we find hope, most often, when situations seem the most hopeless.

As difficult and painful as the situation is in Iraq, now is not the time to stop hoping. This meeting here today encourages me. And so do the many stories I hear from relatives, friends and my religious sisters in Iraq, and from the Iraqi refugees with whom I am working in the Midwest. The story isn’t over yet.

On his first day at work in an urban grocery store, one of my clients was apprehensive as he was quizzed by a curious co-worker, who wanted to know where he was from and whether his family was with him. “Iraq,” he answered, and “no, not all of my family is with me.” Then don’t worry, the co-worker said, “We will be your family in America.” Astonished, the refugee said “His soldiers are dying in my country, and he can say that to me? I want always to work in this grocery store.”

In this most recent violence against Christians in Iraq, a dear friend of mine fled his house in Mosul for the safer villages in the north. Before he left, he entrusted his house key to his

Muslim neighbor, who looks in on the house and calls him regularly to update him on the situation. In one of these calls his neighbor told my friend, “Come back. The neighborhood does not feel as safe to us as it did when you were here. We hope you will come back.”

Can Iraq be again what it once was? Can it be even better? Can it be a place where Iraqis live together as neighbors across the garden wall, across the artificial boundaries drawn by politicians and challenged by terrorists, across the ideological, political and religious divides that are used by the powerful to keep us apart for their own benefit?

These are questions that can only be answered by Iraqis and Americans together. Are you willing to try? Are you willing to not give up? Are you willing to realize that the United States needs to be liberated from the violence and trauma of this war as much as Iraqis do? Then please, consider carefully the recommendations that have been put before you, some of which I’ve enumerated here. The litmus test for their worthiness should always be the protection of Iraq’s religious minorities and the effectiveness of the proposed solution as a step toward integrating fully into Iraqi society people of all races, creeds and ethnicities. Mere tolerance is not enough. Iraq and the United States can say together, “Mission accomplished,” when all of Iraq’s citizens feel safe following the example of my Christian friend in Mosul and his Muslim neighbor. Can we learn, once again, to entrust each other with our house keys?

Thank you.

Recommendations:

1. The US Government should continue to work with the Government of Iraq to ensure that it says and does all that it can to protect religious minorities in Iraq.
2. The US should continue resettlement as an option for Iraqi refugees, with particular attention to Iraqi religious minorities, and should consider using unallocated refugee slots for this population during the current fiscal year;
3. The US should consider a P-2 designation for Iraqi religious minorities (a group of special interest) so that individual Iraqis can apply directly to the US for resettlement (instead of having to go through UNHCR);
4. The US should consider establishing safe houses in countries of first asylum where there are vulnerable Iraqi refugees, especially women and children at risk of trafficking;
5. Security clearances for Iraqi refugees already approved for resettlement should be expedited so Iraqi families do not languish for months or years in countries of first asylum.