

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

November 19, 2010

Mr. Gene L. Dodaro, Acting Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro,

Like most Americans, we were shocked and disheartened by the October 31st attack on Baghdad's Assyrian Catholic Church, resulting in the deaths of more than 50 worshipers and police officers. This attack fits into a pattern of deadly attacks targeted against Iraq's dwindling community of indigenous religious groups, including Assyrians, Mandaeans, Chaldeans, Syriacs, Yazidis, and others.

We have spent the last several years working with our colleagues in the House and Senate as well as the State Department to bring about a greater focus on protecting these ancient peoples during the Iraq reconstruction. We remain convinced following discussions with diplomats, minority advocates, diaspora members, and Iraqi religious leaders who visited the United States earlier this year that the development of a formal comprehensive strategy for the protection of religious minorities is the critical next step our government must take.

In prior years, Congress has appropriated funding for protection and development efforts aimed at Iraq's religious minorities, with a specific focus on the Nineveh Plains region, where these populations are centered. In the FY 2008 base appropriation and in the FY 2008 supplemental, Congress designated a total of \$20 million to assist these vulnerable populations. The FY 2010 base appropriation, which is presently being distributed, includes an additional \$10 million for Iraq's minorities. The 2010 appropriations law also includes report language directing the State Department to focus its efforts on Iraq's ethno-religious minorities, and instructing the Secretary to "submit a report to the Committees on Appropriations not later than 90 days after enactment of this Act detailing the unique needs of minority populations in Iraq, including security requirements, organizations that have received funding from the Department of State and USAID for programs to assist such populations, and the total amount of funds provided for such purposes." Although 2011 funding levels have not been finalized, this issue continues to be a bipartisan, bicameral priority.

Earlier this year, the State Department informed Congress that it had spent over \$25 million to assist minority communities in Iraq, focusing on the dual goals of meeting the immediate humanitarian needs of these vulnerable people, and job creation and economic self-sustainment programs. This figure does not include any of the FY 2010 funding.

Having followed this issue closely through successive administrations, we feel confident that Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iraq Michael Corbin has indeed placed a much-improved focus on the Department's work to protect ethno-religious minorities.

However, the Iraqi diaspora communities in the U.S., many of whom still have family in Iraq, have raised concerns that the availability of assistance is not known to its intended recipients, or that, in some cases, it simply has not reached them at all. A delegation of prominent Iraqi bishops further reinforced these concerns during a visit to Washington this summer, reporting that their congregations and the ancient Iraqi cultures they represent might soon be obliterated. Many of the bishops were completely unaware of U.S. government efforts to preserve and protect their community—and were either uninformed or unaware of the significant funding that had already been disbursed.

We are aware that a publicly available repository of information about the recipients of U.S. funding could be imprudent, given the danger Iraqi minority groups already face. Nevertheless, we request that you undertake a review of State Department and USAID's policies with respect to the distribution of these funds, with a particular emphasis on: (1) whether the populations and communities this money is intended to assist have been adequately apprised of its availability and informed as to how to access it; (2) if there is sufficient transparency with respect to its distribution, allowing lawmakers to adequately assess future resource needs; (3) whether the State Department has put into place sufficient measures to ensure that the funding flows to worthy entities; (4) how the funding might be better administered to accomplish Congressional intent, and (5) whether a comprehensive administration policy to address the unique needs of these ancient communities, including first and foremost their security needs as emphasized in the FY 2010 report language, would provide valuable focus and direction to the Congressionally mandated funding.

While we have made strides in this effort over the last several years, these ancient communities remain extremely vulnerable. Their very existence in the lands they have inhabited for centuries is under serious threat, despite repeated Congressional action intended to assure their survival. As such, we ask for your highest consideration of our request, and we look forward to your report and recommendations.

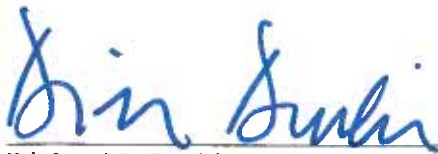
Sincerely,



Anna G. Eshoo
Member of Congress



Frank R. Wolf
Member of Congress



Richard J. Durbin
Senator



Sam Brownback
Senator



Sheldon Whitehouse
Senator



Tom A. Coburn
Senator



James P. Moran
Member of Congress



Christopher H. Smith
Member of Congress



Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress



Dan Burton
Member of Congress



Dennis A. Cardoza
Member of Congress



Sue Myrick
Member of Congress



Gary C. Peters
Member of Congress



Bob Inglis
Member of Congress



Mark Steven Kirk
Member of Congress



Trent Franks
Member of Congress



Ted Poe
Member of Congress



Gus M. Bilirakis
Member of Congress