

Michael Youash Testimony to USCIRF Hearing

Threats to Iraq's Communities of Antiquity

(July 27, 2007)

Introduction

I would like to thank the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) for distinguishing itself yet again on the subject of religious minorities in Iraq. My mandate at this hearing is to draw attention to the plight of Iraq's Christian Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac (herein ChaldoAssyrian) peoples in northern Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) controlled areas and to provide solutions.

It is impossible to begin without first stating categorically my sincere thanks for the sacrifices of this Nation in liberating Iraq and providing us with dreams of better days.

Our dreams for the future were based on statements, such as those of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, on August 20, 2005, at American University in Cairo. She told us, "We should all look to a future when every government respects the will of its citizens – because the ideal of democracy is universal. For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East – and we achieved neither. Now we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people."

To date, the Secretary of State's commitment is proving to be empty. The crisis facing this community cannot be ignored because of the conflict between Sunni and Shi'a Arabs in Iraq. Whether there is a resolution to that struggle or not, the Iraqi Christian tragedy can be confronted and dealt with successfully today.

Authoritarian Pressures, State-based Persecution and Discrimination

In January 2005, the Nineveh Plain area (map enclosed), a region with the highest concentration of minorities such as ChaldoAssyrians, Shabaks, and Yezidis, was disenfranchised. A Major of the United States Army described the disenfranchisement and voter fraud with major media sources. He confirmed that Kurdistan Democratic Party Peshmerga denied the region ballot boxes. In the one area where the US could get ballot boxes, Bashiqa, the KDP Peshmerga entered the town, confiscated the boxes and returned them full.

This was a formative experience for Iraq's Christians, particularly those of the Nineveh Plain. The denial of such a fundamental right left the community entirely scarred.

The Nineveh Plain and areas within the KRG's jurisdiction are also suffering from economic discrimination and suffocation in terms of reconstruction and development, which further fuels soft ethnic cleansing. The funding that does arrive to our towns and villages comes with political conditionalities. The clearest condition is that beneficiaries must become supporters of the ruling-KDP party. Indeed, even gainful employment comes with the precondition that one become a KDP member.

On the issue of economic discrimination/persecution based on employment opportunities, the Christian ChaldoAssyrians going north are confronting the reality of forced membership in the KDP as a prerequisite. This is crushing their hope that things can get better as they flee one dictatorship only to arrive to another dictatorship.

Tangible differences in the structures built for ChaldoAssyrians (where they do have homes re-built for them) and those built for their Kurdish neighbors is telling. The basic housing structures built for ChaldoAssyrians in contrast to the more durable and generous villages built for Kurdish towns is a stark reminder of second-class citizenship.

Arbitrary arrest, summary judgments and punishments are also wide spread. One instance is revealing. KDP members attempted to illegally take possession of a house in the Nineveh Plain belonging to a man who was not present. The man's neighbors, two brothers, prevented the illegal property seizure. Later that night, Iraqi military (wearing the flag of the KRG on their uniforms) entered the home of the two brothers and summarily arrested one. He was accused of being a terrorist. His brother and mother came to the holding facility. The two brothers were viciously physically beaten and jailed. Only when they renounced their actions were they released. The home of their neighbor, in the Nineveh Plain, was successfully occupied by the KDP.

Crimes committed with impunity are the most direct actions exposing the program of soft ethnic cleansing by KRG authorities. This includes murder and the terrorizing of Christian ChaldoAssyrian communities in the Nineveh Plain. On July 17th, 8 days ago, Fadi Nazar Habash, a teenager, was driving his tractor when he was struck by a hail of bullets from Peshmerga in Iraqi military uniform. He pulled the tractor to the side of the road when he saw the Peshmerga vehicle coming. The Peshmerga had the benefit of daylight and knew this was no threat. Most telling is that despite wearing Iraqi military uniforms, a delegation from the KDP came to the family to express their regret at the murder of their son. The message, repeated on July 17th of this year, is that the murder of Christian ChaldoAssyrians can be done with impunity.

Land theft/illegal land seizures, and the KRG's unwillingness to provide sufficient redress is perhaps one of the single-most pressing issues at this time. Indeed, in some cases, very well-placed networks within the KDP are behind the seizure of Christian lands.

From Dere, Coumaneh, Maristek, to Chembre Bethke, to Sarsink to Chaqala Latheh and Chaqala Khtatheh, we are seeing concrete examples of systematic illegal land seizures and land invasions.

The closest Kurdish town to Chaqala Khtatheh is Barifkeh. As early as 1993, a land restitution committee, which included Kurdish authorities indicated that upwards of 1 kilometer of Chaqala Khtatheh's land had been invaded. Just over one decade later, when our team arrived to assess the situation, a larger segment of the farmland of Chaqala Khtatheh was seized and land directly within the destroyed village. Chaqala Khtatheh has yet to be rebuilt while towns such as neighboring Barifkeh have been completely redeveloped.

Land seizures such as that perpetrated in Chaqala Khtatheh represent the dislocation of our people from their lands, the denial of their right to earn a livelihood, and the theft of a chance at realizing their potential. This is a direct effort at soft ethnic cleansing.

Solutions

The solutions to the crisis facing Iraq's Christian ChaldoAssyrians are thankfully quite simple. These are feasible and realistic. They can be done immediately and we cannot wait.

- Material support for internally displaced families, numbering in the tens of thousands, who flee to the north, the Nineveh Plain and surrounding areas is vital. A major step was taken in this respect in the House of Representatives on June 12, 2007. \$10 million dollars has been requested for getting essential aid to religious minority IDPs fleeing to the Nineveh Plain. At the minimum this must be approved in the Senate. It must be followed by other similar allocations in funding in meeting the ever-increasing number of IDPs arriving in the Nineveh Plain.
- The United States Government must press the Kurdistan Regional Government in a sustained and determined manner to end practices that are marginalizing our people and discriminate against them and other minorities.
- Provide, on an urgent basis, the minimal infrastructure and amenities to the Nineveh Plain to allow the smallest minorities to sustain themselves in their ancestral areas. This must include the building of homes, schools and clinics. It requires developing road, electrical, sewage and water infrastructure.
- The USG must stop the effort by the KRG to expand its existing borders to include the Nineveh Plain. The attempts at expanding the KRG into the Nineveh Plain is outlined in the KRG's draft constitution, article 2, section 1. This fundamentally destabilizing agenda is prejudicial to the survival of the Christian ChaldoAssyrians and other religious minorities that constitute the majority population of the Nineveh Plain. It is denying them a chance to determine their own future and they cannot be denied such a fundamental right.
- Convene the civic representatives of the Iraqi minority communities to forge a consensus regarding the political status of the Nineveh Plain territory, for example by forming an autonomous administrative district as provided for in Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution.
- The United States Government has a moral obligation and responsibility to facilitate and drive such an agenda. There are also extensive examples of this activity by the USG. It brought together and almost forced reconciliation between major warring Kurdish factions. In 2002 the USG brought together the Iraq opposition groups. It formed the Interim Governing Council after the removal of Saddam.

Thank you.