

Eshoo Statement on Iraqi Christians

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Washington, D.C. -- Rep. Anna G. Eshoo made the following statement on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives in support of her amendment to H.R. 2601, the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for FY2006 and 2007.

"Mr. Speaker, I rise today to offer an amendment expressing the Sense of the Congress that our government should recognize the unique challenges facing Iraq's indigenous Christian communities, including the Chaldeans, Jacobites, Armenians, Assyrians, and Greek Orthodox Christians.

"I'm a first generation American, of Assyrian and Armenian descent. My grandparents fled their ancestral homeland in the early part of the 20th Century. In fact, my mother received her first communion in Baghdad in 1919.

"I'm the only Assyrian-American serving in Congress today, and only the second to serve here in our nation's history. The first was Congressman Adam Benjamin of Indiana, who passed away at a young age in 1982.

"There are approximately 250,000 Assyrian-Americans in the United States, representing the largest population of Chaldo-Assyrians outside Iraq. All Chaldo-Assyrians are Christian, and because they are, they've been subjected to brutal persecution in their homeland.

"Today, there are 1 to 1.5 million Christians remaining in Iraq, mainly in the Nineveh plain in the North around Mosul. They live in villages that can trace their history back over 2,000 years, a large number of which, because of their geography, have now come under the authority of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

"Among indigenous Iraqi Christians, the Chaldeans represent the oldest rite under Rome. Along with Assyrians who worship within the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East, they represent the oldest surviving Christian population in the world and one that without help during this critical transition period, could be on the brink of extinction.

"These communities have welcomed the opportunity before them since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime to move toward greater prosperity and stability by cooperating in the development of a democratic, pluralistic state.

"Unfortunately, religious and ethnic tensions, as well as discrimination continue to plague these Christian communities. I continue to receive troubling reports from religious leaders indicating that Iraq's Christian population is not receiving their fair share of development assistance.

"Because they are such a small minority, the indigenous Iraqi Christian population has one independently elected ChaldoAssyrian in the entire Iraqi National Assembly, Younam Kanna, a man whom I've met with and hold in high regard. Within the Kurdistan Regional Government in Northern Iraq, representatives from Iraqi Christian communities hold only 5 out of 105 seats.

"Because the Assyrian community is a very small minority in Iraq with one representative in national politics, funding for reconstruction, housing and education are parceled out to those who control the villages and regions where they reside, without sufficient transparency to ensure the proper parity.

"The visible result of these misallocations has been the emigration of as many as 80,000 Iraqi Christians since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime alone. The majority of these individuals, approximately 50,000, have fled to Syria, while others have spread out to Jordan, the Gulf Emirates, and Turkey, all living in desperate circumstances as refugees from their homes. This ongoing exodus is deeply disturbing, and unless action is taken now to address the pressing needs of these indigenous Christians, we may well witness the complete loss of the Iraqi indigenous Christian community.

"If a fully-functioning and sustainable democracy is to emerge in Iraq, the basic rights and needs of all minority groups must be safeguarded.

"My amendment seeks to affirm that commitment by ensuring that all relevant U.S. government agencies and departments pay special attention to the needs of this minority and ensure that they will continue to reside and thrive in their ancestral homeland.

"Many of my Colleagues are aware of the targeting of Iraqi Churches by the insurgents which was reported on the front page of the New York Times last August as another attempt to divide the Iraqi people and further drive Iraq's Christian population from their homes. I'm grateful to our military who are trying to provide security for these communities under attack.

"I also want to bring to my Colleagues' attention another report published in yesterday's San Francisco Chronicle. The headline is "Iraqi Christians find safety in Syria, Religious violence prompted many to flee homeland," and I ask unanimous consent that this report be entered into the record. Dated just yesterday, it details this pressing problem in tragic detail, and is a clear indicator that this is a problem that requires our fullest attention.

"I urge my colleagues to support my amendment and I reserve the balance of my time."

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