

**Statement by
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Global Human Rights, and International Organizations
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Accountability for Perpetrators”**

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Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee for allowing me to speak to you on behalf of the persecuted Christians of Northern Iraq.

My name is Stephen Rasche, and I presently reside in Erbil, capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and home to what is presently the largest viable Christian community in Iraq. In Erbil I serve on the staff of the Chaldean Catholic Archdiocese of Erbil. Within that context I serve as legal counsel for external affairs, Director of IDP Resettlement Programs, including the Nineveh Reconstruction Project, and Vice Chancellor of the Catholic University in Erbil.

Since 2014, the Archdiocese of Erbil has provided almost all the medical care, food, shelter and education for the more than 100,000 Christians who had to flee ISIS, as well as aid to some Yazidis and Muslims.

Just over one year ago I testified here on the Capitol Hill before the Helsinki Commission regarding the critical need for help to the displaced Christians of northern Iraq. I specifically laid out the ways in which the Christians were being shut out from institutional aid, such as that distributed through the United Nations. I explained as well the critical role being played by the private aid community, without whom the Christians of northern Iraq would have by then already perished. I asked that the US Government hear our pleas for help, and warned that without this help, the Christians of the Nineveh Plain could very well disappear.

I wish that I could tell you that in the twelve months that followed that our pleas were heard, and that our plight has found relief. But as I speak before you now, I regret to say that we have still yet to receive any form of meaningful aid from the US Government.

Over the past three years, we repeatedly approached the State Department and US Agency for International Development in Iraq and in Washington, DC to see if they would be willing to fund our humanitarian and rebuilding aid programs. We explained the needs on-the-ground were outpacing private funding and help from governments like the United States was needed to enable these communities to survive.

While we have found the political appointees much more willing to help us since January, the fact is that even after the better part of a year, they have been unable to move the bureaucracy to take meaningful action.

Even in the new administration, career individuals at these agencies have continued to state that they are only concerned with individuals, not communities. They have asserted that directing assistance to particular religious or ethnic communities would be “discrimination” and a “violation of humanitarian principles,” even if these communities had been targeted for genocide and assistance was being directed to them to prevent their destruction. We were also told their own administrative interpretation of humanitarian principles superseded U.S. appropriations law that specifically stated that 2017 “International Assistance and Migration and Refugee Assistance shall be made available for humanitarian assistance for vulnerable and persecuted religious minorities, including victims of genocide designated by the Secretary of State.” Last month Secretary of State Rex Tillerson reaffirmed that Iraq’s religious minorities were the victims of genocide. But even that declaration, combined with the statutory mandate to aid these communities with funds allocated for FY 2017 by Congress in the Consolidated Appropriations Act from May, has been insufficient to create action on the part of these agencies. The fiscal year ended days ago, with these agencies continuing to shirk their statutory obligations. Still no aid has been provided to the imperiled Christian minority.

These humanitarian principles are intended to prevent aid from being used to punish or reward religious, national or racial groups. It was and is incomprehensible to us that these principles have been interpreted and applied to prohibit intentionally helping religious and ethnic minority communities survive genocide. Interestingly, these “principles” were waived last month when the Department of State’s Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration provided \$32 million in emergency humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya Muslims – a religious minority in Burma. As an American I am proud when my country responds to a humanitarian crisis, but this action begs the question of why the State Department, which has distributed over \$220 million in humanitarian assistance in Iraq since 2014, has consistently ignored the dire needs of persecuted minorities in Iraq.

In Iraq, the Christian community has been formally named by the U.S. Government as the targets of genocide. Congress has mandated by statute that communities under such a genocide designation must receive humanitarian funding. And yet, we have received nothing, while another group, without a formal genocide designation or statutory mandate, has received tens of millions of dollars.

We must ask, why the discrepancy? Why is there not a common principle here when it comes to religious minority communities in distress?

As such, HR 390, the Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act, is a vital lifeline we have desperately needed for months. The House of Representatives passed it unanimously on June 6 and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee passed it unanimously September 19. Yet, it still sits in the Senate. We hope that they will consider our existential plight and that time is short for us and make it law soon.

We have explained that as victims of genocide, Christian settlements suffered comparatively more physical damage than others specifically because of their religious identity for the purpose of eradicating any vestige of their previous existence in Iraq. Christians have seen the lowest rate of

return among all Iraqi citizens displaced by the war. East Mosul, for example, has seen over 90% of its majority-Muslim people return home, while the nearby Nineveh Plain, the ancient homeland of Iraq's Christian communities, has seen only about 20% of its people return though these lands were liberated months earlier. This deep sectarian-based return gap reflects the unique large scale and deliberate destruction of Christian towns, but it also reflects the refusal of US aid agencies, and their implementing partners, to include these victimized communities in their humanitarian and rebuilding programs.

Had we received any kind of proper assistance from the US government for the nearly 100,000 displaced Christians in our care who had to flee ISIS, we would by now have been able to resettle the vast majority of them back into their homes in the recovered towns of Nineveh.

Instead, our pool of private donors and already limited funds have dwindled. We had hoped to use these resources for the return of displaced Christians. Instead, we had to repurpose some of these funds for the ongoing humanitarian needs of these same displaced people, including food.

We were thus faced with the excruciating decision of whether to continue keeping our people housed and fed in temporary shelters in Erbil, or return them to their destroyed towns with only the barest funds to rebuild in Nineveh. The towns of Nineveh that were Christian before ISIS are facing new pressures of forced demographic changes, financed by an Iran that seeks to build a bridgehead to the Mediterranean Sea through these lands. So, earlier this year, in response to growing calls by Christian IDPs to return home, we began to support the return of these Christians and rebuilding of their homes and towns through the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee.

The Nineveh Reconstruction Committee (NRC) is a formal, ecumenical partnership between the three largest Christian churches in Iraq: The Chaldean Catholic Church, Syriac Catholic Church and Syriac Orthodox Church. As such, it represents in a unified manner the overwhelming majority of Christians still in Iraq. Its Nineveh Sustainable Return Program seeks to promote sustainable returns by repairing 9,000 homes ISIS damaged or destroyed, removing war rubble to make these towns safe, and giving these communities a voice in the rebuilding of their communities. In a display of transatlantic solidarity, Aid to the Church in Need in Europe and the Knights of Columbus in the United States partnered to launch this \$29.5 million initiative. With a combined \$7 million in funding from these charities, and with additional support from the Hungarian government, we have already repaired 2,254 homes, revived two towns and helped more than 11,000 Christian and other religious minorities return home. Given a fair opportunity to return home, the Christians go home.

Let me be very clear on this point. There is no truth to the argument that Christians in Iraq don't want or need U.S. government assistance. We have been seeking it for years, and continue to seek in a unified way under the collaborative banner of the NRC.

On September 15, this group's sister organization, the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee USA, of which I am President, submitted to the US Agency for International Development a proposal seeking more than \$22 million in funds to build upon the tangible progress we are making to enable families to return. Without such additional funding, however, this initiative will end before it is completed, jeopardizing the very survival of the Iraqi Christian community.

Today, as I speak to you, we are caught fully exposed and at-risk, finding ourselves at a critical historical inflection point, foreign aid decisions over which will determine whether Christianity, and religious pluralism – vital to the US national interest and regional security – will survive in Iraq at all. A depopulated Nineveh Plain, control over which is already fueling competing and sectarian-based claims, is a recipe for more conflict. We are out of funds, our people are trying to return to their homes, the backlash from the Kurdish Referendum has created enormous uncertainty, and our people still have yet to receive any meaningful help from the US or its main implementing partner in Iraq, the United Nations, despite billions in US aid dollars already spent on the Iraq and Syria crises.

The UN Development Programme administers the Funding Facility for Stabilization which is the main instrument through which the US Government seeks to promote post-ISIS stabilization, rehabilitation and political stability in Iraq. The US Agency for International Development has so far spent or allocated all of its funding for stabilization in Iraq, over \$265 million so far, through this mechanism. While status reports from UNDP work in Nineveh purport to show real progress in the Christian majority towns, on the ground we see little evidence of it. Work projects are in most cases cosmetic in nature, and much of that cynically so. “Completed” school rehabilitation projects in Teleskov and Batnaya take the form of one thin coat of painting of the exterior surface walls, with freshly stenciled UNICEF logos every 30 feet. Meanwhile inside, the rooms remain untouched and unusable: there is no water, no power, and no furniture. These pictures taken 10 days ago give an example. Bear in mind that these are government schools, which were due to open today.

Moreover, UNDP reports claiming to show the work being done in areas in which religious minorities are the majority prominently list work done in the formerly Christian town of Telkayf. A copy of this report has been distributed to this committee. Mr. Chairman, there are no more Christians in Telkayf. They were forced from this town by acts of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. ISIS was firmly in control of this town until last fall and many of its Sunni Arab residents remained. Many of those residents, who openly welcomed ISIS while simultaneously engaging in the forced and violent expulsion of the majority Christians, are still there.

Telkayf has also been chosen as a settlement site for the families of slain ISIS fighters. As such, 100 percent of the work being done in this town benefits the Sunni Arab residents of the town, and there is no consideration anywhere in UN aid planning for the displaced Christians, who now depend wholly upon the Church and private sources for their survival. This is well over 10,000 families. That such a representation could be made in the UNDP report, without even the barest attempt at an explanatory note, shows clearly the profound depth of disconnect between representation and reality. In effect, US taxpayers are financing the spoils of genocide.

So what can be done? First, the Senate can pass HR 390 without further delay, thereby returning it to the House for a final vote so it can be sent to the President for his signature and implementation.

Second, the proposal of the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee, now sitting with USAID Administrator Ambassador Mark Green, can be swiftly approved and implemented. It embodies the collective efforts and good will of the people on the ground in Iraq and their supporters around the world, including many Members of Congress, to refuse to submit to ISIS’s campaign of hatred and deny it an ideological victory in Iraq. It is also good aid policy. It offers the US Government a unique

opportunity to have a major impact on Iraq's democratic future and prevent a key ISIS goal of cleansing Iraq of its ancient Christians from becoming fact. It would build upon an existing success story and do so more cost-effectively, without waste and fraud, give Iraq's minorities a say in the rebuilding of their own future, and breathe new life and hope in a stable and prosperous Iraq.

Third, since the agencies have so far ignored the statutory obligation to care for genocide-targeted communities as Congress mandated, I would suggest that Congress urge this Administration to appoint an interagency coordinator empowered to oversee and solve this issue.

These actions taken together can immediately begin to demonstrate the effectiveness of a new aid paradigm which directly empowers and benefits the most vulnerable communities in Iraq and prevent the extermination of this ancient community.

Thank you Mr. Chairman I look forward to your questions.