

Solidarity with the People of Iraq

Statement of Pax Christi International Delegation to Iraq

An international Pax Christi delegation visited Iraq with the generous welcome and assistance of Patriarch Cardinal Emanuel Delly; Bishop Rabban Al-Kass, Chaldean Bishop of Amadya-Shamkan and Erbil; Bishop Louis Sako, Chaldean Bishop of Kirkuk; Bishop Georges Casmoussa, Syriac Bishop of Mosul and Qaraqosh; Father Nageeb Mikhail, OP; the Chaldean Seminary in Erbil and many other religious leaders and representatives of civil society groups in the north of Iraq.

The delegation included International Co-President, Marie Dennis; Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, Pax Christi USA; Christine Hoffmann, General Secretary of Pax Christi Germany; Wiltrud Rösch-Metzler, speaker of the Middle East Commission of Pax Christi Germany; Don Renato Sacco, Pax Christi Italy; Bishop Marc Stenger, President of Pax Christi France; and Katrien Hertog, Pax Christi International staff in Brussels.

They went to the governorates of Kirkuk, Mosul, Erbil and Dohuk from 10 September through 17 September 2009. A planned visit to Bagdad could not be realized.

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The delegation encountered many good examples of work for peace. The extraordinary efforts among religious leaders in the oil city of Kirkuk made it possible for them to visit Sunni and Shiite mosques and to interact with Muslim leaders. In Dohuk they learned about the program of Bishop Rabban’s coeducational, interreligious International School which brings together Muslims, Christians, Yezidie and Turkman to provide a base of human values and an introduction to human rights. They learned from the Dominican sisters of Mosul about their commitment to peace education at a primary level and met

dedicated health care professionals in Kirkuk who serve Muslims and Christians alike. In Erbil the delegation met with Iraqi Non-Violence group LaOnf, an Iraqi nongovernmental organization building a network on nonviolence.

Pax Christi's organizational commitment to reconciliation and nonviolence made these and other similar efforts particularly interesting to the delegation, which also experienced enormous tensions in the country. There were two major bombings while they were there and they encountered among people they visited a great fear of being kidnapped.

Of the areas the delegation was able to visit, the level of security in the Kurdish provinces in the north of the country was much better than in the so-called disputed provinces, Mosul and Kirkuk. But even in the Kurdish provinces, the sense of long-term physical and economic security was lacking and U.N. representatives described human rights violations, particularly against political prisoners and women. 100,000 refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain in the same area.

Christians and other minority groups continue to feel threatened in Iraq and to leave the country. This fact is of deep concern to many people the delegation met, who believe that reconciliation is the way forward and that the loss to Iraq of the Christian community, which was established there in the second century, would be a great tragedy. At the same time, the delegation was told that the conflict in Iraq is political rather than religious, with violence erupting over the balance of power. Minority groups are faced with the choices to join the struggle for power, to remain neutral or to work for a society where everybody has a place.

Finally, they heard from many people about the destruction of Iraq's infrastructure during the first Gulf War that had still not been repaired and about the impact of the long-lasting harsh sanctions that punished ordinary people. They were told that the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 destroyed security and created many new problems for the Iraqi people. The delegation agrees with the Iraqi non-violence network that "refuses occupation and war as

a way to build democracy and establish rule of law, even when it is presented as the only possible option.”

Pax Christi International is enormously grateful to the Christian bishops and communities as well as the civil society of the region for their warm welcome and excellent hospitality and remains committed to the original goals of this important Pax Christi delegation to Iraq: to express solidarity with all Iraqi people; to gain a better understanding of Iraq’s complex reality; and to propose concrete actions that support the ongoing efforts of Iraqi people for peace and reconciliation in their country based on what was seen and heard.

Pax Christi International will:

- ☐ inform the international community about the situation in Iraq and its minorities, as well as about the work for peace and reconciliation of the Iraqi Church, including the testimonies of the martyrs, Bishop Paulos Faraj Rahho, Father Rajeed, Paulos and others;
- ☐ build partnerships between Pax Christi member organizations and Iraqi groups;
- ☐ explore the possibility of sharing Pax Christi expertise and resources on active non violence, conflict resolution, peace building and responses to violent radicalization to interested institutions and communities in Iraq;
- ☐ promote interreligious understanding in our own countries, if possible by inviting Sunni, Shiite and Christian leaders from Iraq;
- ☐ advocate with our own governments to support reconstruction efforts in Iraq.

We urge our churches to:

- ☐ strengthen the church’s role as a builder of bridges;
- ☐ send official delegations from Bishops conferences in other countries to Iraq to understand the reality better;
- ☐ promote reconciliation between the different Iraqi Christian churches;
- ☐ support work for peace and reconciliation in Iraq;
- ☐ prevent and counter the growth of Christian extremism;

We urge the international community to:

- ☐ support the reconstruction of Iraq;
- ☐ to investigate and prosecute past and present war crimes and severe human rights violations on all sides;
- ☐ build trust again in the international community and re-establish international law;
- ☐ work cooperatively to develop a regional system of security and cooperation in the Middle East.

Brussels, 17 September 2009

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