

**Atrocities in Iraq and Syria: Relief for Survivors and Accountability
for Perpetrators
A Hearing Before the Helsinki Commission
Thursday, September 22, 2016
10:00AM
Rayburn House Office Building
Room 2200**

Written Testimony of:

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I. Introduction and Background.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission 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 last viable Christian community in Iraq. In Erbil I serve on the staff of Chaldean Catholic Archdiocese of Erbil. Within that context I serve as legal counsel for external affairs, Director of IDP Resettlement Programs, and Vice Chancellor of the Catholic University in Erbil.

As brief background, the Christian population of Iraq, over 1.5 million in 2003, now numbers barely over 200,000. Over 100,000 of these live in the greater Erbil region. Of those in the greater Erbil region, some 10,500 families are IDPs (internally displaced persons), numbering approximately 70,000 people.

In August of 2014, when ISIS took control of Nineveh Plain, the IDPs of Nineveh and Mosul largely fled to the Erbil region. This included over 12,000 Christian families. There in Erbil, in the early absence of any meaningful institutional humanitarian aid, the Kurdistan Regional Government assigned overall responsibility for Christian IDPs to the Chaldean Catholic Archdiocese. The reasoning behind this was that the Chaldean Archdiocese was the largest existing Diocese in Erbil for which its leader (Archbishop Bashar Warda) was also based in Erbil, and not an IDP himself, which was the case for the other major Christian churches. A part of this responsibility required that the Chaldean Archdiocese properly coordinated relief efforts with all other Christian Churches.

Having accepted this responsibility, and in coordination with the other Christian churches of the region, the Chaldean Archdiocese set about the immediate development of a humanitarian aid operation using the combined staffs of the churches. This effort relied on the private assistance of Christian aid organizations from around the world, which provided critical support in the immediate aftermath of the crisis, and have continued to do so to this day.

In the following months, IDPs were first placed in tents and unfinished buildings, then into Caravans (construction trailers) in camp settings, and most recently, for some fortunate families, into group homes rented by the Archdiocese through our rental assistance program. Additionally, some families had moved

into group homes early on, and these families all received rental assistance from the Archdiocese as well. Also during this time some 13 schools and five medical clinics were established, along with monthly food package programs, all privately funded, to serve the needs of IDPs.

We are serving the various needs of approximately 10,500 Christian IDP families. (Two thousand of the 12,000 Christian IDP families who fled ISIS into Northern Iraq subsequently left the area) Within this overall number of families of assisted, nearly 6,000 families are presently receiving housing rental assistance, at a total cost of approximately \$650,000 per month. Our food package program serves over 10,000 families at a cost of approximately \$720,000 per month, and our medical clinics serve over 6,000 families, at a total cost of approximately \$80,000 per month inclusive of all medicines.

While our responsibility lies primarily with service to the Christian IDPs, we have regularly extended care to non-Christians as well. Our schools and medical clinics serve Yazidi and Muslim IDPs, and our food and housing rental programs include many Yazidi families.

It is noteworthy to point out the coexistence of the Yazidi and Christian IDPs, many of which fled their homes together as groups and have continued to live together in these same groups within the IDP centers. While the management of these IDP centers rests with us as Christians, the care of the Yazidis in our centers is identical to that being provided to the Christians.

All of this has been done exclusively through private aid, which to date totals approximately \$26,000,000. Our largest donors include the EU based Aid to the Church in Need, the Knights of Columbus, the US based Nazarene Fund, The Italian Episcopal Conference, The Chaldean Churches of the USA, and Caritas of Italy. There are many other private donors, all of which can be found in reports previously submitted to the office of Congressman Smith.

It is no exaggeration to say that without these private donors, the situation for Christians in Northern Iraq would have collapsed, and the vast majority of these families would without question have already joined the refugee diaspora now destabilizing the Middle East and Europe.

We say this because throughout this entire period of crisis, since August 2014, other than initial supplies of tents and tarps, the Christian community in Iraq has received nothing in aid from any US aid

agencies or the UN. The reason for this rests in the "Individual Needs" Policy adhered to by the US government and the UN, as well as other US backed aid agencies.

Essentially, when we have approached any of these entities regarding the provision of aid assistance to the Christians of Northern Iraq, we have been told that we have done too well in our private efforts, and that the standards we have provided for our people, bare as they are, exceed the minimum individual needs standards currently existing for those agencies.

Additionally, we are advised that any Christian IDPs who would choose to seek refuge in existing UN camps could receive aid there if they applied. However, even UN representatives themselves privately admit that the Christians would be under real threat of additional violence and persecution within the Muslim majority camps. In any case, given the recent history, there are no Christians who will enter the UN camps for fear of violence against them.

II. Issues for Consideration.

With this all as background, as the time of forced displacement is now over two years, our private donors are running out of ability to sustain our current level of care. This brings us to two critical points to share with this Commission.

1. Standard of Care Requirements in Context. While the standard of care being received by Christians may marginally exceed that being provided elsewhere by the UN and similar organizations, there are no other IDP groups in Iraq that face the immediate existential threat now being faced by the Christians. This level of care, which we have provided exclusively through private funding, is the only thing, other than their deep Christian faith, which has given these IDPs continued hope and incentive to stay in the region until they may eventually return to their original homes, or set up new lives inside the Kurdistan Region. Simply put, absent this minimal care, the few remaining Christians of Iraq would largely scatter into the diaspora and disappear for good from their ancestral homes.

2. Adherence to Individual Needs vs. Extinction of a People. From a moral standpoint, we ask you to consider that the uniquely perilous status of the Christian community requires that they be viewed not as individuals, using the standard "Individual Needs" policy assessment, but rather as a group, threatened with extinction as a people, the victims of genocide and a cycle of historical violence which seeks to remove them permanently from their ancestral homes. While not discounting the very real hardship being faced by other IDP groups, it is the Christians in particular who face the real and immediate threat of extinction in Iraq.

III. Specific Requests.

As we near the beginning of the expected liberation of Mosul and the Nineveh Plain, we request that Commissioners consider supporting the allocation of \$9,000,000 in direct aid specifically designated to supporting the existing humanitarian and educational aid programs of the remaining Christians of Northern Iraq. This amount would allow for continuation of the existing housing, medical, food, and educational programs for an additional six months, by which time expected events in the region would allow for an informed reassessment.

While understanding there may be legal constraints of the US Government regarding recipients of US backed aid, we would request that the ultimate use and implementation of any such aid be managed through our existing system, which is already thoroughly integrated into the Christian community. This could readily be done under proper oversight from an approved distributor of US government aid, and we stand by ready to work in good faith with any such partner. Our existing aid donors regularly audit our use of funds, and we are thoroughly familiar and capable in this regard.

Provision of this aid would not completely end the ongoing support from our existing private donors. Rather, with basic needs now being met largely through established governmental aid, it would allow for our decreasing private funds to be utilized for urgently needed reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts. Thus the support of US humanitarian aid would greatly leverage and increase the effectiveness of the remaining private aid.

III. Closing Comments.

Members of the Commission, within our small group in Erbil, every morning we wake up and rob six Peters to pay twelve Pauls. And every night we pray that we will be given the strength and the financial help from somewhere to get us through the next day. We have been doing this for two years now. We are doubtful that we can sustain things much further under our present limitations. Our private donors are reaching their breaking point, and we feel it, as do the tens of thousands of people who are in our care.

And yet, these next twelve months remain perhaps the most critical of all for us. If the efforts and sacrifices made to remove the evil of ISIS from Northern Iraq are to have a purpose, and if the rightful designation of genocide is to have a purpose as well, it is critical that the remaining Christians receive, and receive now, the direct support necessary to remain in place as a viable community. How utterly tragic would it be, that the established governmental aid community allowed these persecuted people, so vital as bridge builders in any peace and reconciliation process, to disappear just as we reached the time wherein a rebirth was within sight.

I thank you for your time and for your continued efforts.