

US Congress Takes a Step to Help Iraq's Persecuted Religious Minorities

Washington -- The United States Congress, through the Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations, approved yesterday an amendment to request \$10 million in aid for internally displaced religious minorities in the Nineveh Plain (AINA 6-12-2007).

The Nineveh Plain amendment for internally displaced persons (IDP) relief represents the first formal allocation of funding acknowledging the crisis facing Iraq's indigenous Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac Christian population. Congressman Mark Kirk, and a coalition of members that came around him to unanimously approve the amendment, demonstrate the courage to recognize a problem and find feasible solutions.

"Congressman Mark Kirk is most certainly a champion who believes we cannot allow Iraq to fail. His measure will help to ensure that Iraq remains ethnically and religiously plural by aiding IDPs in the Nineveh Plain" said Michael Youash, Project Director of the Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project (ISDP) -- a special project of the Assyrian Academic Society. ISDP is a Washington-based policy institute providing research and analysis on the situation of Iraq's most vulnerable minorities.

This was a long process, beginning with the pioneering efforts of Congresswoman Anna Eshoo, who proposed the bold Foreign Relations Authorization Bill amendment in 2005 calling on targeted spending for Iraq's Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac population.

ISDP's policy work and advisory role was complimented by an unprecedented effort of a tight-knit coalition of Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac organizations working for the genuine good of their people. At the forefront of that effort is CASCA, the Chaldean Assyrian Syriac Council of America, principally consisting of the Assyrian American National Federation, the Chaldean American Chamber of Commerce, the Assyrian National Council of Illinois and the Chaldean Federation of America. Additionally, Assyrian Aid Society's efforts on the ground to assist IDPs provided vital insights into identifying the scope of the problem.

"In several forums and hearings, congressional representatives have been asking tough questions on the 'de-Christianization of Iraq' and 'Apartheid-like treatment' of this ethnic group, as a result of discriminatory use in US reconstruction funding." said Youash, "Awareness is growing that this loss of Iraq's most ancient and indigenous ethnicity is simply unacceptable."

Regrettably Christian Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriacs, Shabaks and Yezidis are targeted by Islamists and insurgents in much of Iraq, and the prejudicial use of reconstruction and development funding in northern Iraq. This measure will do much to assist these people and help ensure that a 7,000 year-old civilization and presence in their homeland is not completely erased in a few years of liberation.