

Holy See Statement on Displaced Iraqis

"The World Is Witnessing an Unprecedented Degree of Hate"

GENEVA, MAY 3, 2007 (Zenit.org).- Here is the April 17 text of an intervention by Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Holy See's permanent observer at the United Nations at Geneva, during an international conference called by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

The conference was considering the humanitarian needs of refugees and internally displaced persons within Iraq and neighboring states.

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Mr. President,

1. In Iraq it seems "easier to die than to live," as some media reported in the face of the increasing violence and daily atrocities that are destroying innumerable lives and the hope of an entire people. The initiative taken by the UNHCR to bring together representatives of governments and of humanitarian organizations is therefore an opportune and promising decision.

The delegation of the Holy See expresses its appreciation and looks forward, as a result of this conference, to heightened awareness on the part of the international community and to concrete forms of help for the uprooted populations of Iraq. Over the years, the UNHCR has rescued and given hope to millions of victims of persecution, conflicts and violation of basic human rights. We are all challenged to maintain this noble tradition.

2. The world is witnessing an unprecedented degree of hate and destructiveness in Iraq; this phenomenon concomitantly exerts a widening deadly impact in the entire Middle East region. Sectarian and tribal clashes, military actions, armed groups competing for power, kidnappings, rapes, international terrorism, threats to and murder of the innocent members of families simply because they uphold their ancestral faith -- these are all elements that, in combination threaten human dignity and social well-being in the region. Targeting of unarmed civilians is a particularly tragic sign of total disregard of the sacredness of human life.

While the consequences of this generalized violence affect the social and economic life of the country, they also are a stark reminder of the passionate appeals of the late Pope John Paul II to avoid "the tremendous consequences that an international military operation would have for the population of Iraq and for the balance of the Middle East region already sorely tried, and for the extremisms that could stem from it." He insistently called for negotiations even though he knew well that peace at any price might not be possible (John Paul II, Angelus, March 16, 2003).

3. Massive uprooting and displacement of the Iraqi population is now indeed a tremendous consequence. The figures are telling: Some 2 million Iraqis currently displaced internally and 2 million others have already fled the country, and between 40,000 and 50,000 are fleeing their homes each month.

The very generous welcome provided by Jordan and Syria, in particular, and by the other countries, is certainly highly commendable. Economic, social and security concerns, however, are putting to the test this willingness and capacity to welcome.

It is urgent, therefore, for the international community to take up its responsibility and share in the task of protection and assistance, to answer the call for action now through the implementation on the ground and in practical decisions of the legal and moral commitments it patiently formulated and agreed upon. Where war and violence have destroyed the social tissue and the unity of Iraq, judicious political choices and a non-discriminatory humanitarian engagement would be the first step to re-establish a pluralistic unity.

4. There are special categories of victims that stand out in this largest Middle East exodus since the still unresolved Palestinian one of 1948. Displaced women, elderly and children bear the brunt of the tragedy. With the experience of daily violence and, even more tragically, with the killing of family members before their eyes, many children are traumatized and remain without professional care. Most uprooted Iraqi children wake up in their exile to a daily experience of uncertainty, deprivation, lack of schooling, and to hard labor just to attain the minimal essentials of human survival. One has to wonder how their psychological scars will condition the future.

Christian and other religious minorities who have been a target of forced eviction and ethnic and religious cleansing by radical groups find themselves in limbo in their temporary place of refuge since they are unable to return to their homes and are without a possibility of local integration or resettlement. It is the suffering of all the victims that should prompt a coordinated, effective and generous response.

5. A comprehensive reconciliation and peace are the obvious responses that address the root of all forced displacement. As the international community pursues this complex goal, addressing immediately the needs of the millions of uprooted Iraqis and other refugees in the area will prevent further regional destabilization and will relieve their pain.

This is not the time to look at technical definitions of a refugee, but to recall "the exemplary value beyond its contractual scope" attributed by states, from the very beginning, to the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951).

Recently, the development of the concept of complementary protection has become a significant conclusion to support a humane response in massive

displacement. Therefore, among the practical measures that must be upheld and implemented as means of due protection, are acceptance of all people fleeing generalized violence, respectful of their human rights and of the principle of non-refoulement, registration for an orderly assistance, provision of appropriate legal documentation.

In this humanitarian response, the countries hosting displaced Iraqis cannot be ignored by the international community and must receive tangible and prompt solidarity. A community-inclusive approach to assist vulnerable displaced people and hosts can be a winning strategy for an effective outreach even to needy persons who are the most isolated and vulnerable.

In fact, without this solidarity, the victims escaping violence are at risk of new forms of exploitation and of being deprived of health and education services, housing and employment possibilities. Facing such vulnerability, some persons are tempted to place themselves in the hands of smugglers in order to escape but simply are confronted with additional difficulties in the countries they manage to reach.

While the first humanitarian need is peace, equally vital is a coordinated response that raises awareness of the immense crisis we face. Such a response must involve actors from states, civil society and United Nations. In order to ameliorate the plight of all displaced people inside and outside the country, this response must enjoy a responsible participation of all Iraqis.

All humanitarian workers who have been delivering active assistance, notwithstanding risk and sacrifice, deserve the appreciation from the global human family, as well as adequate resources to carry out their mission. They serve as effective instruments, as shown, for example, by the tens of thousand of people of all backgrounds and convictions being helped daily by the Catholic charitable network in Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and Egypt.

Local NGOs as well as faith-based organizations and others often have the best capacities to reach out to the neediest, build upon community solidarity, and, in this moment of increased tensions between ethnic, tribal and religious groups, open up genuine dialogue. It makes good sense that they be empowered, financially supported and actively engaged in situation assessments and response programming.

6. In previous but similar crises of massive displacement, the mobilization of the international community proved effective in providing durable solutions. There is a need to match past effectiveness. While the right to return has to be kept alive for displaced Iraqis, other examples in recent history have demonstrated that the option of resettlement may need to be enhanced, and doors opened by more countries and for greater numbers, so that pressure within the region may be alleviated on a short-term basis.

A renewed and concerted effort is called for, however, to make conditions in Iraq and in the whole region conducive to a decent and sustainable coexistence among all its citizens. The historical diversity of communities can contribute to a democratic experience and can link this society to the world. Such a contribution presupposes mutual acceptance, the rejection of homogenization, and constructive pluralism. The implementation of all durable solutions to end displacement in this context can prevent the emergence of chronic, protracted situations that result in long-term and humiliating circumstances for large numbers of new refugees.

Mr. President,

7. My Delegation is convinced that, at this juncture of the Middle East crisis, vigorous leadership is demanded of the international community. Surely, the greatest challenge is to find a way for reconciliation, to reconstruct the will to dialogue, and to hope again so that peace may win. Generous, timely and coordinated humanitarian help for all the victims of such horrific violence will achieve justice for them and will begin the indispensable process of healing their tragic condition.

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