



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

The Battle for Mosul: Protection Issues

**Thursday, October 6th, 2016
12:00 Noon – 1:00 P.M.
2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good afternoon, and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's briefing on how to protect the civilian population of Mosul, as efforts get underway to retake the city from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL.

I want to thank our panelists for joining us today, and express my appreciation to the Congressional Research Service for agreeing to moderate our discussion.

These days, when I open the paper in the morning, all too often I am confronted with news of a humanitarian crisis somewhere. In recent months a lot of attention has been focused on the terrible consequences for civilians, and especially for children, of the brutal war in Syria. But civilians are also the victims of conflicts in Sudan, South Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, among others.

In all of these cases, we find ourselves scrambling to figure out how to stop slaughters that are underway; how to respond to the flows of refugees and internally displaced people that armed conflicts always cause; and how to try to ensure accountability for those responsible for the devastation. We seem always to be reacting to an unending series of terrible situations.

But what if we had the information and the leverage to prevent such devastation, or at least to reduce the damage? Would we do so? That is the question we're here to discuss today.

Everybody knows that sometime during the next several weeks, an assault by U.S-backed Iraqi forces on Mosul, ISIL's largest stronghold, is expected to take place. But there is growing

concern that the operation is moving forward in spite of many unanswered questions about how civilians will be protected during and after the fighting.

As many as 1.5 million people are living in Mosul. By one estimate, some 8,000 ISIL fighters live among them. Rules of engagement to protect civilians during door-to-door searches or air strikes are unclear. Sectarian militia forces being recruited by the Iraqi government have a past record of abusing civilians. Plans are not in place to safely evacuate civilians from the city, nor to coordinate humanitarian assistance for the hundreds of thousands who may flee. Nor is there a plan to manage factional fighting among anti-ISIL forces, or to govern Mosul, once the Islamic State is defeated.

All of this suggests that we could be looking at yet another major humanitarian disaster – on top of an existing crisis that has already overwhelmed humanitarian agencies. Just since January 2014, 3.3 million people have been displaced in Iraq. The UN estimates that 10 million people in the country are in need of humanitarian assistance.

But the global humanitarian appeal for Iraq for 2016 is only 56% funded, and a flash appeal issued in July specifically for Mosul is only 48% funded. The plans and resources needed to protect the lives and dignity of the residents of Mosul during and after the anticipated military campaign are simply not in place.

And that means we risk worsening the very conditions that allowed ISIL to emerge in the first place. We could see the defeat of ISIL, only to witness the emergence of new groups of violent extremists down the road.

Our panelists today represent organizations that have been tracking the situation in Iraq and working on the ground to support the Iraqi people. I look forward to hearing their analysis and recommendations. No one disputes the importance of going after ISIL or liberating Mosul. The question is how to do that in a way that does not target civilians, nor permit atrocities, nor deepen the already severe humanitarian crisis. In this case, we have an opportunity to prevent at least some of the devastation of war. We have a moral obligation to try to do that.

I will now turn the mic over to Christopher Blanchard of the Congressional Research Service, who will introduce the panelists and moderate the discussion. I also want to note that we have received a statement from Rasha Al-Aqeedi, a native of Mosul and scholar with the Al Mesbar Studies and Research Center in Dubai. She is unable to join us today, but we are making her recommendations available to you.

Thank you.