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Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Statement of Rep. James P. McGovern
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing
“The Humanitarian and Human Rights Crisis in Iraq”
HVC-210 Capitol Visitor Center - Fri, Dec 12, 2014 - 12:00 PM – 2:00 PM

Good afternoon and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission’s hearing on *The Humanitarian and Human Rights Crisis in Iraq*. I would like to welcome all of our witnesses today – thank you for your hard work in providing protection and advocacy to people affected by the crisis in Iraq. I would also like to thank the staff of the Commission for organizing this important and timely hearing.

For at least the past four years, a humanitarian and human rights crisis has unfolded in Iraq. This crisis escalated sharply in the beginning of this year due to the rapid expansion of “Islamic State” militants and the resurgence of sectarian militias. Sectarian attacks have spiraled to an alarming level; 2014 has been one of the worst periods of civil strife in the country’s recent history.

All sides of the conflict have committed gross violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. Most notably, Islamic State militants have committed brutal, systematic, and widespread attacks against civilians, including mass executions, sexual slavery of women and girls, forced recruitment of children, and persecution of Iraq’s diverse ethnic and religious communities. On the other side of the conflict, Iraqi security forces and affiliated armed groups, too, have posed threats to civilians by launching military attacks on civilian villages. Shi’a militia groups that support the Iraqi government have also committed kidnappings and executions against Sunni civilian men. This conflict has taken a heavy toll on Iraq’s most vulnerable civilians, women, and children.

This deepening conflict has created a major humanitarian disaster. According to U.N. estimates, 20,000 civilians have been killed or injured across Iraq this year and millions have been forced to flee. To date, an estimated 5.2 million people are in need of humanitarian aid and protection. These people include Iraqis uprooted from their homes, communities hosting the displaced, and civilians trapped in conflict-affected areas. In addition, Iraqis displaced during earlier conflicts and Syrian refugees also have urgent humanitarian needs. The provision of humanitarian aid is further complicated by limited access to areas where fighting is ongoing.

As I noted earlier, the human rights and humanitarian crisis in Iraq existed before the invasion of Islamic State forces, and has worsened exponentially since then. This includes the ability of the Iraqi government to provide such basic services as health care, clean water, and electricity, and to provide protection to such vulnerable groups as children, women and minorities. These are matters of grave concern in their own right, as well as the fact that they contribute to the ability of ISIL forces to exploit the vacuum created by the absence of a State presence.

At today's hearing we hope to identify the needs of people affected by this staggering crisis and discuss what further measures need to be taken. To date, the United States has significantly scaled up the provision of humanitarian assistance and protection. The U.S. has also undertaken a separate, active military role in Iraq to counter the Islamic State. I would like to use this time today to assess our current response and learn how we can improve it. I look forward to hearing recommendations from our panelists on what the United States and the international community can do to alleviate human rights abuses and human suffering in Iraq, while reducing and preventing the rise of sectarian tension.