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Statement by Congressman Alcee L. Hastings and Senator Benjamin L. Cardin
Co-Chairmen
Commission on Security and Cooperation In Europe

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
Press Conference on Report on Religious Freedom Conditions in Iraq
December 16, 2008

We commend the tireless work of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, whose fight against religious repression and intolerance has truly enhanced the United States' role in addressing the challenges we face worldwide. USCIRF's most recent report on religious freedom conditions in Iraq is a critical tool to help U.S. policymakers address the circumstances of religious freedom within minority communities.

As Co-Chairmen of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, we remain extremely concerned about the rise of intolerance and discrimination directed toward members of religious and other minority groups. It is imperative that we not ignore these acts of intolerance, but instead face them head on.

Religious extremism in Iraq continues to threaten all minority communities. The decline of religious pluralism is most troubling, which has the potential of emptying Iraq of its minority communities. The Iraqi government has a moral obligation to protect the rights of all minority communities by implementing concrete solutions to ensure their safety.

As we recently commemorated the 60th Anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, sadly, Iraq has not upheld this declaration that would guarantee freedom of religion to all. Instead, we have seen the manifestation of violence and criminal attacks against religious minority communities, who are not protected by their own government and have been forced to flee.

USCIRF's report not only offers an insightful look into abuses against religious minorities, but also the need to improve conditions for refugees and internally displaced persons. As their resources are depleted and they remain stranded, jobless, and deprived of essential services – they will look for any means to survive. This is a recipe for disaster. The United States must take the lead and provide a 'humanitarian surge' in responding to this crisis. The future of the Middle East depends on it.

Moving ahead this will remain a top priority of the Helsinki Commission as we commence the 111th Congress next month. In cooperation with USCIRF, we look forward to working together to advance human rights around the globe.

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