



THE HON STEPHEN SMITH MP

MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
PARLIAMENT HOUSE
CANBERRA ACT 2600

28 JAN 2009

Mrs Julia Irwin MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

- 2 FEB 2009

Dear Madam Chair

Thank you for your letter dated 26 November 2008 on behalf of the Standing Committee on Petitions concerning a petition on the persecution of Christians in Iraq.

The Australian Government has continuing concerns about the persecution of Christian and other minority groups in Iraq. Despite significant improvements in the security situation in Iraq, there are still instances of sectarian violence that are causing the displacement of families and communities.

Australia condemns all incidences of human rights violations against religious minorities. Through our Embassy in Baghdad, the Government has been active in bringing its concerns to the attention of the Iraqi Government. I also raised Australia's concerns about the protection of human rights in Iraq when I met the Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister, Barham Salih, in Baghdad in June 2008. The Government continues to monitor human rights in Iraq, including the persecution of Christian and other minority groups, and has instructed the Australian Embassy in Baghdad to make high-level representations on the matter at every appropriate opportunity.

On 19 December 2008 I announced that the Australian Government would provide \$1 million to assist Christian and other minority groups in Ninewa Province, Northern Iraq, who have been the victims of recent outbreaks of sectarian violence. That assistance will be provided through the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Medical Corps (IMC). It will fund emergency provisions, medical support, reconstruction efforts and the tracking of families who have fled into neighbouring countries. This funding brings the total humanitarian assistance provided by the Australian Government to Ninewa Province to \$3 million. Australia is already providing \$2 million through the IMC to assist Iraqis in Ninewa Province who have suffered from violence. This funding is going towards emergency medical training, women's centres and mental health services for primary school age children.

Australia is also providing funding to assist vulnerable and displaced Iraqis more generally, to be delivered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This is part of Australia's overall assistance program to Iraq, worth \$165 million over the next three years.

As a further measure, in July 2008 the Government announced an increase of 500 places to Australia's humanitarian immigration program in 2008-09 specifically for Iraqis. In this regard I note that you have also written to the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship.

Thank you for referring this petition to me.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Smith