

Westminster Hall debates 4 July:

i) Persecution of Christians

ii) Kurdistan Region in Iraq

Catholic Bishops' Conference Briefing

Please find below a briefing from the Catholic Church ahead of two Westminster Hall debates on Tuesday 4 July. For more information please contact: Liam Allmark via liam.allmark@cbcew.org.uk or 020 7901 4846.

Persecution of Christians and the role of UK embassies (9.30am)

We believe that protecting freedom of religion or belief for people of all faiths and none should be a foreign affairs priority.

The 2015 Human Rights and Democracy Report acknowledged the importance of this right and positive steps that the UK has taken to promote it. However it is disappointing that there is no explicit reference to promoting freedom of religion or belief as a human right in either the government manifesto or the FCO single departmental plan for 2015-2020.

UK embassies can play a vital role in supporting religious minorities at risk of persecution including vulnerable Christian communities. It is essential that they are provided with adequate funding and specialist training to undertake this role.

The UK has also worked with the EU to help member state embassies implement detailed EU guidelines on promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief. We hope that the same or higher standards will still be implemented in UK embassies after Brexit and that collaboration with other European countries will continue.

Finally we recognise the important role that international trade can have in improving rights and applying pressure to governments that commit abuses. We encourage the government to ensure that new trade deals after Brexit include human rights clauses, which can help to promote basic liberties including freedom of religion or belief.

Possible questions for the debate

What training and funding will the government provide to help UK embassies promote and protect freedom of religion or belief during the course of this parliament?

Does the government intend to continue working with the European Union on international guidelines for promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief, after Brexit?

What plans does the government have to include human rights clauses in new trade deals and will the FCO work with DIT to ensure these are effective in promoting liberties including freedom of religion or belief?

Kurdistan region in Iraq (2.30pm)

Over 1 million Iraqi internally displaced persons are currently accommodated in the Kurdistan region (in addition to over 200,000 Syrian refugees). While a small minority have recently returned to areas around Mosul and the Nineveh Plains that have been liberated from Daesh, resettlement remains extremely limited because of poor security and lack of basic services.

The Catholic Church in the Kurdistan region has played a significant role in helping IDPs and refugees since this crisis began. The Diocese of Erbil currently supports around 10,000 families (70,000 people) – providing accommodation, subsistence, education and employment. Many of these people are from religious minorities including Christians and Yazidis who were specifically targeted by Daesh and now face an uncertain future in the region.

International resettlement opportunities are needed for some of the most vulnerable IDPs and refugees in the Kurdistan region who cannot receive the support they need locally. For example more than 5,000 Yazidi women and girls as young as 12 have been held as sex slaves by Daesh and those who have managed to escape inevitably need specialist treatment and mental health support. However this is often not available - for instance there are only around 25 practicing psychiatrists in the Kurdistan region and less than 100 practicing psychologists across the whole of Iraq.

Because the UK's Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) is currently limited to Syrian nationals, Iraqi nationals driven from their homes by Daesh (including most of the Yazidi community) are not eligible for resettlement under the scheme, even though the government has acknowledged that they are effectively fleeing the same conflict.

We therefore strongly support extension the scheme's scope to include Iraqi nationals given that the conflict with Daesh spans the Iraq/Syria border. We also hope that the government will urgently resettle vulnerable Yazidi girls through the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) which is open to people from the wider MENA region.

Possible questions for the debate

What support does the government plan to provide over the course of this parliament for Churches and religious communities that are accommodating IDPs and refugees in the Kurdistan region?

What discussions has the government had with the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government about safeguarding the future of religious minorities in the Kurdistan region?

What assessment has the government made of the possibility of extending the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme to Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons including Yazidi women and girls who have escaped sexual-slavery under Daesh?