

NEWS

Iraq Hope**Catholic Volunteers in Iraq Part of a Growing Network**

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WASHINGTON — President Obama ordered 17,000 more troops to Afghanistan Feb. 17, apparently beginning to shift focus in the war on terrorism away from Iraq.

But a growing number of people, including many Catholics, are volunteering in Iraq for reconstruction efforts as citizens work to restore civility in a country fraught by strife.

In the United States, a community is growing of those who have returned home yet remain determined to continue working. Now this group of volunteers is gathering formally to start the Iraq Society, an organization focused on rebuilding the war-torn country.

John Stinson, who served in the reconstruction effort, said that he spent a lot of time with Iraqi citizens and Americans who were working with them to bring stability to local communities.

A practical man who is knowledgeable of Iraqi conditions, Stinson is reluctant to discuss the political aspects of the war, but comes to a simple conclusion: "We opted to go into that war, and as a Catholic, I'm not happy about war," he stated. "But once we're committed, what's the best way to finish it?"

The answer he gives is one of witness, working to instill a sense of renewal in a country torn by violence. "There is plenty of violence over there already," he said. "Now we've got to work with people one-on-one."

While in Iraq, many of the Catholics formed their own community within the Green Zone in Baghdad; the sacraments were administered by military chaplains. The group also formed a "roundtable" of the Knights of Columbus in Baghdad, who work to distribute aid to Iraqi citizens.

Back in the United States, Stinson gathers with friends and contacts from Iraq. Their service in that country brought them together. "I started this years ago when I first came back to the U.S. When my friends came back, we started getting together for these dinners," he said about the community that is now becoming the Iraq Society. "Usually, somebody has just come back or is just going over. We get together and we share in that fellowship."

Lynne Schneider, an Army officer who has been deployed twice in Iraqi combat zones, is among the group of volunteers that continue to work for the success of the Iraqi community.

Schneider is involved in helping widows and orphans and also works with For Victims of War and Poverty, an organization that helps war victims. "The devastation created in the past 10 years has been enormous, and the people that suffer the most are women and children," she says.

During her charitable efforts, Schneider met Nidhal Garmo, founder of For Victims of War and Poverty. Garmo, a Baghdad native who immigrated to Detroit in the 1980s, is now running this organization solely dedicated to providing the country with medical assistance.

Schneider said that what inspires her is the incredible valor of Iraqi citizens who are working to restore their country. "You have the enormous resolve of the Iraqis that want to live normal lives. It's part of our nature that wants to help them do that," she said.

Iraqi Christians

Manuel Miranda, also a Catholic, met Stinson and Schneider through his own efforts working as a senior advisor to the Iraqi prime minister's legal office and establishing the Iraqi Office of Legislative Statecraft.

Miranda said that he believes it is important to complete a mission of peace and prosperity in Iraq and notes that

many in the United States are still committed to that principle.

"At this point, it becomes a nonpartisan issue," he said. "There's a lot of people who didn't support the war but support the effort to bring about peace and stability in Iraq."

Through Miranda's efforts, the group of volunteers is formalizing to remind people of the continuing efforts in Iraq and to assist those efforts.

"We've got to keep it on the front burner," said Schneider. "There's a tendency for people in our country to say, 'Let's forget about this and move on to the next thing,' but the world doesn't work that way."

The plight of Iraqi Christians is particularly important, as Schneider describes their fate as "absolutely dire," especially in recent years. "The persecution against Iraqi Christians is in all forms," she said, relating stories of families torn apart.

She noted that local leaders harass the Christian minority, imposing strict taxes on families for not being Muslim, driving families from their homes, and even killing fathers.

Stinson said churches and monasteries are often targeted and blown up, and Christian communities are shattered. Christian leaders often have to send their children out of the country to prevent them from getting kidnapped.

Although many Christians have fled, Schneider said that the communities are determined to rebuild their way of life. "They want people to come back," she said. "Christian communities long for their leaders and their homes and friends back so that they can return to their way of life."

But the Christian leaders who bolster their fellow Iraqis' efforts are often persecuted more fiercely. Stinson describes them as the "real heroes" of the Iraqi reconstruction.

"It all goes back to the Gospel. Only by witness, by being there and giving them an example of what right looks like, can you make a difference," Stinson said. "Christians in Iraq have been giving that witness for years. It's a very costly witness, and they pay for that."

*Charlie Spiering writes
from Washington, D.C.*