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Christian Council of Sweden

Message from the President and the General Secretary of the Christian Council of Sweden regarding the visit of a delegation from the Council of Christian Church Leaders in Baghdad

During the final week of September 2007 the Christian Council of Sweden has the privilege to host a group of Church leaders from Baghdad. The main cause of the visit is to tie mutual bonds of friendship between the Christian communities in Iraq and Sweden and to share in the common task of all Christians to be peacemakers in their own country and throughout the world.

Iraq is a country with a rich cultural heritage, important for all humankind. The biblical rivers of Euphrates and Tigris remind us of the common roots of all the religions confessing their faith in the one God. St. Thomas, the Apostle, and his disciples preached the Gospel here and ever since the time of the Apostles, Christian life, witness and worship have been important parts of the identity of the country. Later on centuries of co-existence of the three Abrahamic monotheist religions have made the country a colourful mosaic of spirituality and pluralist culture.

For many decades now, however, the Iraqi people, regardless of faith and cultural identity, have suffered from war and violence. Thousands and thousands of lives, as well as immense material resources, have been wasted in warfare and terror. The land is in ruins, infrastructure is demolished, the needs of the people are overwhelming. After the Iran-Iraq war, the two Gulf wars, the embargo and the occupation the nation is torn apart in agony, lawlessness, hatred and fear.

With a special sentiment of sorrow we see the decline of the Christian population in Iraq. From the time of the first Gulf war in 1980 the Christian part of the population has diminished from 8-9% to 4%. Christianity is about to be extinct from one of the core lands of the ancient Church. Many are displaced in their own country without job and houses, without means to fulfil the basic needs for themselves or their families. Huge numbers of Iraqi inhabitants have fled from violence and suffering to the neighbouring countries of Jordan, Syria and Turkey and some even to countries as far away as Sweden.

Therefore, it is also an important part of the visit of the Church leaders to meet with the communities of their own Churches in Sweden, all represented in the constituency of the Christian Council of Sweden, and including many refugees from Iraq and other countries in the Middle East.

For many reasons it is indeed a special responsibility for Church leaders and all Christians in the western countries to be in solidarity with their suffering brothers and sisters in Iraq.

In praying and working for the future of the people of Iraq we need to influence and challenge our own and all other western governments that they may take on the task to restore peace and security to the country. Only then it will be possible for the citizens of Iraq to shape their own future.

What Iraq needs today is total reconstruction. Iraq could be a country of wealth and prosperity, but today everything is needed: generators for electricity, clean water, water pipes and wells, roads and infrastructure, housing and working opportunities, all the fundamental means to lead a normal human life.

And first and foremost: Peace and Security.

In the quest for peace and security the governments seriously have to take into account the importance of faith and religion in the life of the people of the Middle East. When fanatics for violence abuse religion, advice from mature and responsible religious leaders can make a real difference. There are many high-ranking religious leaders, Muslim as well as Christian, who already are playing an important stabilising role in society. They would all welcome a dialogue with decision makers to prepare way for peace in Iraq.

Our Iraqi friends and fellow Christians have come to us from a country of profound suffering and widespread emotions of fear and hopelessness to share with us the light that shines through all darkness and this light of love will prevail. Their witness has moved our hearts, and their exercise of the Christian virtue of hope in the midst of darkness has challenged us. May we cherish our bonds of friendship as well as this challenge and thus be faithful to our task to be peacemakers each in our own context.

Lord, make us instruments of your Peace. Amen.

Uppsala and Stockholm September 28th, 2007

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