

**Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and
Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O'Brien**
**Remarks to the Annual Meeting of Catholic aid agencies
operating in Syria and Iraq**

Rome/Holy See, 17 September 2015

As delivered

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a privilege to be here to talk to you about the humanitarian situation in Syria and Iraq. Thank you for this opportunity, and for all your work to support people who are living through these brutal conflicts.

The Catholic Church is playing a leading role in supporting the most vulnerable, both in Iraq and Syria and around the world. You directly help people to weather the most difficult circumstances and to unite in the face of suffering. Your deep understanding of communities, their history and their priorities, makes you an important partner.

I am honoured and humbled to be here among you, as I know you understand humanitarian work must be guided by strong principles and our common and shared belief in humanity; that we must address human suffering wherever it is found; that we provide life-saving assistance, protection and dignity to everyone, regardless of their race, religion, nationality or political persuasion; that we must give those we seek to assist a voice and that we speak out on behalf of people affected by crisis.

I also fundamentally believe that only when we all work together - in a coordinated, coherent, strategic way - we can be so much more than merely the sum of our parts.

The world looked on in horror last year when the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) unleashed horrific violence against Christian and other minority communities in northern Iraq.

Ordinary people, including Christian and other minority communities that had been an integral part of Iraq for centuries, fled virtually overnight as violence took hold. Hundreds of thousands of people were forced to take shelter in church yards, with friends and neighbours, in unfinished buildings, schools and in camps.

In June, I visited Barharka Camp in Erbil where I met women and girls who were still reduced to tears by the pain and suffering caused by ISIL's attacks. One year later, they were still in shock.

As you know, the violence knows no bounds and affects every community in Iraq and Syria: Yezidi, Christian, Shabak, Turkmen, Shia, Sunni, Kurd. All have been attacked directly by one group or another, undermining the foundations of these diverse societies. The international humanitarian community must stand in solidarity with all persecuted minorities of Iraq and Syria. We must support them through these terrible times until they find security and peace once again.

Humanitarian needs in both Iraq and Syria continue to grow as the conflict becomes more and more protracted.

Half the population of Syria have fled their homes in the past five years, and more than four million people have been registered as refugees in neighbouring countries and North Africa.

In Iraq, over 8.6 million people are in need of protection and assistance including 3.2 million people who have fled from their homes since January 2014. In the past few months alone, nearly 300,000 people have been newly displaced. More than two million people live in areas outside government control which are extremely difficult for humanitarian agencies to access.

Nearly half of Iraqis in need are children who will bear the scars of war for a lifetime. Three million are out of school. They have already suffered the loss of their childhood. Humanitarian agencies are trying to make sure that they have some hope of growing up and realising their dreams. But we know we can never make up.

In Syria, five years into the conflict, the humanitarian situation remains dire. Over 4 million Syrians are refugees in countries near and far. There are 12.2 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria, including 7.6 million displaced people inside the country.

More than 400,000 Syrians are living in areas that are considered besieged. That means we rarely or never access these areas with humanitarian aid, and the people there cannot move freely.

Those who have managed to move to safety often find themselves living in poverty, without access to healthcare, education or work, as host communities in neighbouring countries come under strain. Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan have shown exemplary generosity but sadly, they have not received the support they need from the international community.

An increasing numbers of Syrians - and now Iraqis and people from other conflict-ridden places - are paying huge amounts for perilous journeys to Europe. They have no other

choice. It is flee or die. People are leaving because they fear the violence or they lack water, food, health care.

I thank Pope Francis for his leadership on this issue, and for his call to religious communities and churches throughout Europe to shelter refugees fleeing war. I echo his call and encourage governments and communities alike to do everything they can to assist Syrians and Iraqis to find safe refuge, until they can return home. We must share our humanity.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The humanitarian operations in Iraq and Syria are among the UN's largest and most complex in the world. Humanitarian aid is being provided to at least 2 million Iraqis every month. Emergency aid including ready-to-eat food, bottled water and basic survival items are provided to hundreds of thousands of people along roadsides and at checkpoints as they move in search of safety.

In Syria, the UN and our partners, including your brave colleagues on the ground, are aiding millions of people every month. During the first part of the year, food assistance was provided to an average of almost six million people per month, non-food and shelter assistance for over 4.4 million, safe water for over 5 million and medical treatments for almost 9 million.

But as much as this is, it is only providing the most basic and urgent help to the most vulnerable people. We could do much more if we had the resources.

The global appeal for Iraq stands at \$497.9 million but just one third of that has been received. As a result, UN food aid to a million people has been halved and further reductions are likely. More than 1 million people no longer benefit from healthcare support.

The level of funding for humanitarian programmes in Syria is even lower – less than one third of the amount required to reach everyone who needs aid.

Humanitarian aid can never be the solution. For that, politicians must address the underlying causes of conflict; promote inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue; and speak out against extremism and intolerance.

While people are suffering, we will continue to work together in our efforts to support Iraqis and Syrians through these terrible times.

Thank you for everything; you, and all the people you represent, for all that you are doing to help.

Thank you.