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Congress of the United States House of Representatives

October 25, 2012

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
2201 C St NW Ste 7276
Washington DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton:

More than a year has lapsed since the House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed bipartisan legislation (H.R.440), introduced by myself and Rep. Anna Eshoo, to create a special envoy at the State Department charged with focusing exclusively on the plight of religious minorities in the Middle East and South Central Asia, including Pakistan and Afghanistan. Senators Roy Blunt and Carl Levin introduced companion legislation, S.1245. Yet, today, both this bill and the House-passed legislation are languishing in the Senate. This is deeply disappointing. Even more disappointing is the fact that the State Department has urged Senator Jim Webb to oppose this bipartisan legislation and put a hold on it in the Senate.

Senator Webb has indicated that he is uncomfortable with the legislation moving forward absent a hearing by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I have no objection to such a hearing, and would welcome it. In fact, I wrote Senator Kerry on July 23 echoing Senator Webb's request for a hearing before the lame duck session, but he never held it. I am concerned that time is running out – both in terms of the legislative calendar for this year and in terms of the plight of these communities. Will a special envoy guarantee these communities' survival – and even flourishing – in the lands they have inhabited for centuries? No one can predict for sure. But I am certain, that to do nothing is not an option – lest on the State Department's and this Congress' watch we witness a Middle East empty of faith communities, foremost among them the beleaguered Christian community.

As you may know, this legislation is widely supported by the religious freedom advocacy community and by many of the groups that represent these besieged communities in countries of strategic importance to the U.S. such as Iraq, Egypt and Pakistan. Last month, the enclosed letter was sent to Chairman Kerry, Ranking Member Lugar and Senator Webb, from a multi-faith coalition of international religious freedom advocates. The letter was spearheaded by the American Islamic Congress, Open Doors USA and the Simon Wiesenthal Center and several other individuals and organizations.

Given the widespread support for this bill, I still cannot understand why both the State Department and Senator Webb would want to block this bipartisan legislation from receiving a hearing and a vote. On July 29, 2011, the House version overwhelmingly passed 402-20 with

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not one Democratic 'no' vote. More importantly, I would venture that the Coptic Christians, Baha'is, Chaldo-Assyrians, Ahmadis, small remaining Jewish population and countless other religious minorities throughout the Middle East and South Central Asia who face daily persecution, hardship, violence, instability and even death would be hard-pressed to see your objection to this straight-forward, bipartisan legislation.

Despite the introduction of the bill having pre-dated the so-called "Arab Spring," the dramatic changes in the region over the last year have only made these communities more vulnerable. As such, a special envoy has never been more needed. Consider the roughly 8 million Coptic Christians that live in fear especially with the ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood and various Islamist elements. According to the annual report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), released earlier this year, "[i]mplementation of previous court rulings – related to granting official identity documents to Baha'is and changing religious affiliation on identity documents for converts to Christianity – has seen some progress but continues to lag, particularly for Baha'is. In addition, the government has not responded adequately to combat widespread and virulent anti-Semitism in the government-controlled media."

While the violence continues in Syria, the administration seems unable to muster much more than empty rhetoric and the significant Christian population finds itself especially vulnerable. An October 24 *Wall Street Journal* article stated that one widely-cited tally estimated that "34,000 people have been killed." In Iraq, the once vibrant Christian community has been halved from 2003 to the present day. Thousands have fled the country, with many presently living in ghettos in neighboring countries, in the face of violence – violence which for years the State Department has failed to recognize as targeted in nature, despite the disproportionate representation of Iraqi Christians and other minorities among the refugee population. USCIRF also found in its annual report that, "[l]arge percentages of the country's smallest religious minorities – which include Chaldo-Assyrian and other Christians, Sabean Mandaeans and Yezidis – have fled the country in recent years, threatening these ancient communities' very existence in Iraq."

In Pakistan, Shabbaz Bhatti – Pakistan's only Christian cabinet member – was gunned down in March 2011 for daring to challenge the blasphemy laws and for being outspoken on his defense of Asia Bibi, the young Christian mother of five, facing a possible death sentence on charges of blasphemy. For months prior to the assassination, I repeatedly urged the State Department to provide Shabbaz with an armored vehicle, in face of repeated threats on his life and in recognition of his strategic import in the region. Such a vehicle never materialized, leaving Shabbaz vulnerable to the murderous aims of extremists in his own country, which ultimately took his life.

The examples above are but a sampling of a devastating trend which has broader geopolitical implications. Religious pluralism is central to any vibrant democracy and religious minorities have historically been a moderating influence in these parts of the world.

