Sydney – 8 June, 2011

On 30 May 2011 Mr. Chris Hayes MP, Federal Member for Fowler of the Labor Party of Australia, moved a motion during the Private Members Business entitled Religious Minorities in Iraq which has been recorded in the transcript of Parliamentary proceeding, the House of Representatives Hansard.

Motion by Mr Hayes:
That this House:
(1) notes that:
(a) for more than 2,000 years religious groups such as Assyrians, Mandaens, Chaldeans, Syriacs and other Aramaic speakers have called Iraq home;
(b) in 2003, Australia was part of the 'coalition of the willing' that invaded Iraq in the belief that Iraq harboured weapons of mass destruction;
(c) since 2003 there have been horrendous acts of persecution against these religious minorities in Iraq, including murders, bombings and extortion; and
(d) the Catholic Church reports that one million Christians have fled Iraq since the 2003 invasion; and
(2) recognises that:
(a) thousands of people are sheltering in Syria, Egypt, Jordan and the northern regions of Iraq because they feel they cannot return to their homes for fear of death and persecution;
(b) due to our part in the 'coalition of the willing', Australia has a moral responsibility to deal compassionately with these displaced people; and
(c) it will be a damning critique on humanity and the Coalition forces, who have vowed to protect the people of Iraq, if religious groups with such a significant historical link to the region are forced out at the hands of terrorists

The following is an extract from Mr. Hayes’ speech delivered in the Australian Federal Parliament:

I rise to speak about an issue which is of great concern—that is, the persecution of the ethnic and religious minorities of Iraq which has escalated since the invasion of Iraq by the coalition of the willing in 2003. Without wishing to be political about this, the point should be made at the outset that, regardless of policies of participation in the coalition of
the willing, Australia was part of the coalition and what goes with that, I believe, is responsibility. This is an issue that I have raised on a number of occasions in this chamber and also in correspondence with the minister for immigration. Unfortunately, however, this is an issue which is often sidelined in debate about Iraq and the ongoing security concerns in the region. My position is unequivocal. As a member of the coalition of the willing, Australia has a responsibility to pursue this issue and to do all it can as a good global citizen to raise awareness of the issue, in the first instance, and, more importantly, to ensure that the democratically elected government of Iraq protect all its citizens regardless of race and religion.

Regardless of one's opinion about the invasion, there is no doubt that persecution of minorities in Iraq requires compassion and a proactive response. I strongly believe those countries that participated in the 2003 coalition of the willing that invaded Iraq have a moral responsibility imperative, and that is what I want to focus on in this debate. Despite the Australian government's motives to help restore democracy in Iraq and to seize evidence of weapons of mass destruction, and despite the contest that may have been associated with that, the fact is that Australia did participate in that invasion. As a consequence, we have unleashed certain forces that hitherto were not fully understood before 2003.

There are a number of credible reports that members of ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq are subject to continuous persecution, often to the point of death, within their own country. These include various Christian groups, the indigenous Assyrians, Mandaeans—the followers of John the Baptist—Chaldean Catholics, Syriacs and the other Aramaic speakers who have all called the geographic area known as Iraq home for the last 2,000 years. They all have a unique history within Iraq but, at the moment, they are all disproportionately represented amongst those who have fled Iraq since 2003. They are also disproportionately represented in the refugee numbers in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Egypt. We see the numbers are truly astounding when we look at the figures associated with those who have fled Iraq due to persecution. The US State Department says that prior to 2003 Christian leaders estimated that there were somewhere between 800,000 and 1.4 million Christians across the various indigenous Assyrian groups, such as the Chaldeans, Syriacs and Armenians. Currently, according to the American State Department, the number is somewhere around 400,000. If you look at the Sabaen-Mandaean community—the community that follows the teaching of John the Baptist—you see the number is even more stark, with the current community numbering around 3,500—down from 60,000 in 2003.

It is clear that there is real persecution and a real ongoing fear of persecution for those minority groups in Iraq. It is not limited to religion or is a black-and-white case of something that has been experienced by any particular groups. It transcends religion and includes groups such as, as I say, the indigenous Assyrians, whose rights must be protected in any resolution of contemporary Iraq.

While the Iraqi constitution protects freedom of association and freedom of religion, there is one hell of a gap between those statute rights and the real situation on the ground with these minorities being persecuted and those responsible for the persecution not being held to account. The reports, such as those released by the UNHCR, the Assyrian
International News Agency, Amnesty International and the Minority Rights Group International, all point the finger that this persecution is happening and, quite frankly, that not enough resources have been committed to addressing these concerns.

The Catholic Church, for instance, has estimated that this issue has seen over one million Christians flee Iraq since 2003. A secondary issue to all of that in this debate is the plight of refugees and the role that we in Australia have in assisting those persecuted to come to this country to make a new start. As I said at the outset, having participated in the coalition of the willing, for whatever reason, what goes with that participation is responsibility.

There are many people in my electorate of Fowler who come from these persecuted minorities and, as all participating in the debate probably know them personally as well, they know what a first-rate contribution they have made as citizens of this country. They have embraced Australia as their new home and I have greatly enjoyed getting to know them and their communities better. On their behalf, I have written previously—as the member for Werriwa and now the member for Fowler—to the then Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Senator Chris Evans, and to the current minister. I believe we must do more to assist those who are fleeing persecution in Iraq. This is our moral responsibility and, while so far very few visas have been granted to refugees fleeing persecution and currently sheltering in Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and other places, it is my strong hope that this will change as we do more in this space.

As I mentioned previously, I have forged a strong relationship with community leaders and I thank them for their continuous support and advocacy for their communities. In particular, I thank Mar Meelis Zaia, the Archbishop of the Assyrian Church of the East of the diocese of Australia, New Zealand and Lebanon, for his continuous advocacy and leadership on this issue. I would also like to thank and commend the work of Hermiz Shahen of the Assyrian Universal Alliance and Mr Amad Mtashar, who represents a significant proportion of the Mandaean population and which is also represented by me and the member for Werriwa.

In the limited time I have left, I would also like to draw attention to the provinces of northern Iraq, in the area of Kurdistan. Many indigenous Assyrians and Christian minority groups have sought sanctuary in those provinces. It is one thing to have a degree of sanctuary shown to them there, but without resources such as schools, hospitals and also the opportunity of having a future, it is one step away from the persecution from which they fled in other areas of Iraq. If we are going to be serious about a refugee or a visa solution to all of the issues here, we do need to make a renewed commitment with financial as well as other resources to Iraq with a view to reducing this persecution and doing something just for the people of Iraq.

On behalf of the Assyrian community in Australia, we would like to thank Mr. Chris Hayes MP, for raising the Assyrian issue on many occasions with the Australian Federal Government, and for his outstanding efforts to support the rights of the indigenous Assyrian of Iraq.

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Presenting the AUA petition, from left; Mr. David M. David, Mr. Simon Essavian, Mr. Chris Hayes MP, Mr. Hermiz Shahen and Mr. Hormiz Karemi