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Humanitarian concerns in Iraq must be addressed

by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- The ancient Christian communities that once thrived in Iraq "now face potential extinction," said U.S. Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, urging the United States to develop a postwar plan to help Iraq resolve the humanitarian consequences of the seven-year war.

The fact that U.S. combat forces are expected to leave by Sept. 1 "is good news for our American servicemen, their families and the nation," the cardinal said. "But this departure should not be accompanied by a withdrawal of our support for the Iraqi people, particularly for the millions of displaced Iraqis."

After Sept. 1, there will still be 50,000 Americans in Iraq -- noncombat troops -- who will "help maintain the peace and support the Iraqi army and police force," the cardinal pointed out, but said that as combat forces leave, violence could increase against those who have been displaced, including Christians.

The cardinal, who is the retired archbishop of Washington, made the comments in a recent op-ed piece that appeared on PoliticsDaily.com. He is a consultant to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration and Catholic Relief Services, the bishops' overseas relief and development agency.

Although the international community, led by the United States, has provided basic assistance and resettled a small number of Iraq's refugees, he said, a long-term solution to such massive displacement "has proven elusive." Many Iraqi families have been left stranded because they are afraid of returning to Iraq and unable to permanently settle in their host country, he explained.

Cardinal McCarrick said a postwar plan, such as the Marshall Plan that restored Europe after World War II, should be developed in cooperation with the Iraqi government and the international community to find solutions for Iraqi refugees and displaced people. Another example of such outreach was the program that

brought many Vietnamese to the United States and other countries in the late 1970s.

"These are examples of American resourcefulness and willingness to repair, to the extent possible, the ravages of war," the cardinal said.

He said the United States has a moral responsibility to figure out how to handle "the humanitarian challenges that could follow withdrawal."

Of special concern are Iraqi Christians and other minorities who he said continue to be the targets of systematic violence. "Even now," Cardinal McCarrick wrote, "Christians continue to flee Iraq at levels comparable to the rate near the beginning of the war, a deeply troubling sign."

He said withdrawing from Iraq without a restoration plan will not only affect Iraq but neighboring countries -- Jordan, Syria and Lebanon as well, with many Iraqis fleeing to these countries and causing a strain on those populations and their resources.

Currently, he said the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, which is responsible for addressing the refugee crisis, is more than 60 percent short of funding needed to help people. The agency also said 10,000 refugees who were supposed to be resettled this year have no place to go.

According to the cardinal, the U.N. agency is particularly concerned about displaced women and children, many of whom could become victims of human trafficking.

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Leaving a large number of displaced Iraqis unsettled within Iraq and throughout the Middle East is a moral issue first, he said, but the situation could potentially create long-term social and political problems, hindering the ability of the United States to achieve other important policy goals.

"Abandonment of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced cannot be an option," Cardinal McCarrick wrote. "We cannot leave behind a humanitarian crisis in the hope that it will correct itself."

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