

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 17, 2010 at 3:21pm

New Wikileaks docs show U.S. pressing Vatican on Iraq, GMOs

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NCR Today

Previously confidential diplomatic cables released today as part of the Wikileaks disclosures show American diplomats pressing the Vatican to take a more positive line on the aftermath of the U.S.-led war in Iraq, and on genetically modified food.

The five new cables posted on the Wikileaks site range in date from March 2001 to June 2008. In broad strokes they don't add much to what was already known, either about the Vatican or about American foreign policy, but they do add some intriguing new details.

A cable from April 2007, for example, reports that then-U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See Francis Rooney requested a high-level Vatican meeting to protest remarks by Pope Benedict XVI on the situation in Iraq during his Easter message that year.

Speaking before pilgrims in St. Peter's Square on Easter Sunday, Benedict said on that occasion: "Nothing positive comes from Iraq, torn apart by continual slaughter as the civil population flees."

According to the April 26 cable from the U.S. embassy, Rooney met with Vatican diplomats several days later to emphasize what he described as the "many positive developments" in Iraq, and to say that "we didn't see how the papal comment on the subject was constructive under the circumstances."

The cable quotes Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, a Moroccan-born prelate of French extraction and the Vatican's foreign minister, as replying that while there may be "some bright spots" in Iraq, the "overall death toll" remains worrying.

The cable concludes by informing the State Department that the U.S. embassy will "continue to press for constructive comments from Vatican officials on Iraq."

Iraq continues to be a top diplomatic concern for the Vatican, especially in light of mounting attacks on the country's Christian minority. Most recently, Benedict XVI addressed the deteriorating situation facing Christians in Iraq in his message for the Jan. 1 "World Day of Peace."

The lengthiest of the five cables released today dates from April 2005, and updates long-standing efforts of U.S. diplomats to press the Vatican toward acceptance of genetically modified food.

The cable quotes two mid-level officials at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and at "Cor Unum," a Vatican council responsible for overseeing Catholic charitable activity around the world, to the effect that GMOs would "eventually be non-issues at the Holy See," but for the moment the Vatican was unlikely to become more explicitly favorable due to "vocal opposition among some Catholic laypeople and clergy."

Noting that opposition to GMOs within Catholicism is especially strong in the developing world, one Vatican official reportedly joked that the church in the Philippines would "go into schism" if the Vatican adopted a pro-GMO stance.

The cable quotes an official at "Cor Unum" as saying that the "mainstream opinion" within the Vatican is that the "science is solid" that GMOs are safe. The main concern for the church, the official says, is likely to be the economic dimension of biotech food "whether they will make farmers in the developing world more dependent upon multi-national companies in the West."

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One interesting tidbit reported by the cable is that the strongest pro-GMO voice in the Vatican had long been Italian Cardinal Renato Martino, at the time still the president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. Yet, the cable reports, American diplomats could no longer count on Martino to carry the ball.

A deputy to the cardinal, according to the cable, told American diplomats that Martino had cooperated with the U.S. embassy to the Holy See on GMOs in part to "compensate" for his strong criticism of the U.S.-led war in Iraq. The cable said the deputy had reported, however, that Martino no longer felt he needed to take that approach.

Other cables released today include:

" A 2001 report that the Vatican had asked the U.S. and the U.K. to press Uganda and Rwanda to pull troops out of the Kivu region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and to participate in the peace process.

" A September 2007 report on a conversation with the Lebanese ambassador to the Holy See, analyzing possible contributions the Vatican could make to promoting free elections in Lebanon. (The consensus was that the Vatican's most valuable contribution would be through pressuring Syria to leave Lebanon alone.)

" A June 2008 cable reporting that Pope Benedict XVI would not grant an audience to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad while the controversial Iranian leader was in Rome for a summit of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. American diplomats had pressed the pope to snub

Ahmadinejad, though a Vatican official said the logic for denying the meeting was that too many leaders made requests at once due to the FAO summit.

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