

"MEASURE OF NEW IRAQ PROPOSALS IS WHETHER THEY LEAD TO
'RESPONSIBLE TRANSITION,' USCCB PRESIDENT SAYS; BISHOP SKYLSTAD
CALLS FOR 'URGENT, CIVIL, NATIONAL DEBATE'"

WASHINGTON — In a statement today from Jerusalem, Bishop William S. Skylstad, President of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said new proposals for how to move forward in Iraq must be judged by a key moral question, namely, "how can the U.S. bring about a responsible transition in Iraq."

"Each course of action, including current policies, ought to be evaluated in light of our nation's moral responsibility to help Iraqis to live with security and dignity in the aftermath of U.S. military action," Bishop Skylstad said. "Our nation's military forces should remain in Iraq only as long as their presence actually contributes to a responsible transition. Our nation should seek effective ways to end their deployment at the earliest opportunity consistent with this goal."

Determining when a responsible transition can be met, Bishop Skylstad noted, will include reaching such benchmarks as minimally acceptable levels of security; economic reconstruction to create employment for Iraqis; stronger political structures and greater respect for religious freedom and basic human rights. Traveling in the Holy Land for a meeting with representatives of bishops' conferences from North America and Europe, Bishop Skylstad emphasized that there is a need for "broader regional and international engagement" and that more sustained U.S. leadership is needed to address conflicts in that region, especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the crisis in Lebanon.

The USCCB president also repeated calls for a "substantive, civil and non-partisan" debate about alternative choices in Iraq and added that this "civil dialogue is even more essential and urgent at this moment of national discussion and decision."

"At this critical juncture as our nation seeks a new way forward in Iraq, our leaders have a moral obligation to examine where things genuinely stand in pursuing justice and peace in Iraq, to assess what is actually achievable there, and to evaluate the moral and human consequences of alternative courses of action and whether they truly contribute to a responsible transition," Bishop Skylstad said.

The full text of Bishop Skylstad's statement follows.

EVALUATING PLANS FOR A RESPONSIBLE TRANSITION IN IRAQ
A Statement of the President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Bishop William S. Skylstad
Bishop of Spokane
January 12, 2007

The President has put forth a new plan for addressing the difficult situation in Iraq. This

proposal is rightly generating intense discussion in Congress and across our country. As our nation weighs the President's proposals and considers alternatives offered by others, our Conference of Bishops seeks to once again lift up a key moral question that ought to guide our nation's actions in Iraq: How can the U.S. bring about a responsible transition in Iraq?

Each course of action, including current policies, ought to be evaluated in light of our nation's moral responsibility to help Iraqis to live with security and dignity in the aftermath of U.S. military action. Our nation's military forces should remain in Iraq only as long as their presence actually contributes to a responsible transition. Our nation should seek effective ways to end their deployment at the earliest opportunity consistent with this goal.

The Holy See and our bishops' Conference expressed grave moral concerns about military intervention in Iraq and the unpredictable and uncontrollable negative consequences of invasion and occupation. In light of current realities, the Holy See and our Conference support broader regional and international engagement to increase security, stability and reconstruction in Iraq.

Benchmarks for progress toward a responsible transition in Iraq include: minimally acceptable levels of security; economic reconstruction to create employment for Iraqis; and political structures and agreements that help overcome divisions, reduce violence, broaden participation, and increase respect for religious freedom and basic human rights. These measures may address whether the traditional principle of "probability of success" can be met. Any action or failure to act should be measured by whether it moves toward these benchmarks and contributes to a responsible withdrawal at the earliest time, or whether it is likely to increase divisions, violence, and loss of life. Another necessary step is more sustained U.S. leadership to address other deadly conflicts in this region, especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the crisis in Lebanon.

In repeatedly calling for a "responsible transition," our Bishops' Conference has also consistently called for substantive, civil and non-partisan discussion of ways to bring about a responsible transition in Iraq. ¹ Such civil dialogue is even more essential and urgent at this moment of national discussion and decision.

As pastors and bishops we are deeply concerned for the lives and dignity of the people of Iraq who suffer so much and for the men and women in the U.S. military who serve bravely, generously and at great risk. As religious leaders and defenders of human rights, we have expressed particular alarm at the deteriorating situation of Christians and other religious minorities in Iraq. Their great vulnerability demonstrates the growing dangers facing the entire population of Iraq, including Sunnis and Shiites.

At this critical juncture as our nation seeks a new way forward in Iraq, our leaders have a moral obligation to examine where things genuinely stand in pursuing justice and peace in Iraq, to assess what is actually achievable there, and to evaluate the moral and human consequences of alternative courses of action and whether they truly contribute to a

responsible transition. At this difficult moment, let us pray for our nation, for the people of Iraq and for all those who bear the responsibility and burden of these difficult choices. We ask God for courage, humility and wisdom as we seek a path to a responsible transition in Iraq.