

Pope says Iraq wrong to hang Tariq Aziz

Vatican urging Iraq not to hang former Deputy Prime Minister Tariz Aziz.

By [Global Research](#)

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The Vatican is urging Iraq not to hang former Deputy Prime Minister Tariz Aziz.

Aziz, a Roman Catholic and the only Christian member of the Saddam Hussein regime, was an English-speaking international diplomat who held the post of Foreign Minister prior to becoming Saddam's deputy.

He visited Pope John Paul II in February 2003 to enlist the Pontiff's help in trying to prevent an invasion of his country. Pope John Paul spoke out against the proposed invasion calling it illegal. His pleas went on deaf ears and the invasion went ahead three weeks later.

Subsequently more than 100,000 Iraqi civilians were killed, and hundreds of thousands more were severely injured. Most cities, including Baghdad, were largely destroyed. Infrastructure including power plants, government ministries, television and radio stations were heavily bombed. Only the Iraqi oil ministry survived intact.

On Tuesday this week Aziz received the death sentence. He had been in prison since he gave himself up to U.S. forces in April 2003. He was serving a 15-year prison sentence imposed on him by an Iraqi court in 2008. Following an interview with the London Guardian in August he was charged with persecuting Shiites. He was convicted and sentenced this week.

The Vatican spokesman, Rev. Federico Lombardi, said Tuesday, the Vatican hoped the sentence would not be carried out. He said commuting the sentence would encourage reconciliation and the rebuilding of peace and justice in Iraq.

Lombardi said the Vatican would likely intervene through diplomatic channels.

Aziz has had many contacts with the Catholic Church over his years in the Iraq government. In 1992 when Iraqi officials were refusing to renew an agreement that would allow Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity to remain in Baghdad, Chaldean Patriarch Raphael I Bidawid appealed to Aziz, and the nuns were allowed to stay. In 1998, Aziz flew to the Vatican and met with Pope John Paul II to request the Vatican's support in getting U.N.-imposed sanctions on Iraq lifted.

His meeting on 14 February 2003 resulted in the Vatican stepping up diplomatic efforts to prevent the U.S.-led invasion. The Vatican representative to the UN twice addressed the Security Council to outline its opposition to the then-proposed war.

Separately former British MP Tony Benn and journalist and human rights correspondent

Felicity Arbuthnot, have written a letter to Pope Benedict, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Archbishop of Westminster, British Prime Minister, David Cameron, Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, and Foreign Secretary William Hague calling on them to use their influence and contacts to prevent the hanging of Aziz.

"So much blood has been spilt in the illegal invasion of Iraq, that it is hard to comprehend," the pair wrote.

"The charge against Iraq's former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, is religious discrimination. Ironically, half a million Iraqi Christians, have fled, due to persecution, since the invasion," wrote Benn and Arbuthnot. "Uncounted numbers have been murdered. They had lived side by side with the majority Muslim population, since, seemingly 33 AD., when it is believed, St Thomas founded Christianity in Mesopotamia."

"The charge relates to an assassination attempt on Aziz and Saddam Hussein, in Dujail, Iraq, by affiliates of the Iranian backed Dawa party, in 1982," the two activists wrote. "The same Dawa Party to which Nuri al Maliki adheres. The retribution in Dujail was certainly woeful, but it was a decision made by the President. In context, it pales, however, against the massacre meted out to the population of Fallujah, in 2004 by America's forces, in retribution for the murder of four mercenaries, and reaction against U.S., troops, who had been killing men, women and children, unaccountably since the invasion."

The veteran former British MP and correspondent continued in their letter, "Mr Aziz was part of a government that far from religiously discriminating, gave annually, proportionately, equally, to all religions for upkeep of their places of worship and related offices. Punishments were meted out not on basis of religion, but for crimes committed. Harsh they indisputedly were, but it is shaming to reflect that they pale, in comparison to that which has occurred, and continues to occur, under the occupying powers, from the day of the invasion."

"Tariq Aziz gave himself up the United States authorities, in good faith," the pair wrote. "That faith was ill founded and abused. He is an elderly man and was in poor health long before the invasion. His days are anyway, surely numbered. I beg you to take at least this chance to save just one life. Mr Aziz is a nationalist, as all his government, they could have fled. They chose to stay in Iraq, because they are Iraqis through and through - unlike the current government, with their foreign loyalties and passports, largely."

The former veteran British MP and human rights correspondent called on Pope Benedict and the British government, and the two leading archbishops in England to act. "Any lack of action, which results in another lynching, will impose that horror on any citizen of conscience, since we are, so we are told, a democracy. We beseech you to act."

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