

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **NZ Ex-Hostage Returns to Iraq**

AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND – Harmeet Singh Sooden has joined an international human rights delegation travelling to Iraqi Kurdistan from 7 to 23 November 2009. Iraqi Kurdistan is a semi-autonomous region of Iraq administered by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). The delegation is sponsored by the Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT). CPT's Iraq project is based in Suleimaniya.

This is his first time returning to Iraq since he was freed from captivity four years ago. While participating in a CPT delegation, he and three others were kidnapped in Baghdad on 26 November 2005 by the Swords of Righteousness Brigade. One member of the group, US citizen Tom Fox, was murdered on 9 March 2006. Mr Sooden and the remaining hostages, Canadian James Loney and Briton Norman Kember, were freed two weeks later on 23 March 2006.

As a member of the delegation, Mr Sooden is meeting with representatives of NGOs, human rights groups, displaced persons, government officials, and others to focus public attention on the challenges facing people in Iraq, mainly in the Kurdish north. The delegation is also participating in CPT's ongoing project of documenting the human rights situation in Kurdistan. "My role is simply to report the genuine views of the people in Iraq," says Mr Sooden, "with the ultimate aim of encouraging the public to influence Government policy."

The Kurds of northern Iraq faced discrimination, terror and death under the regime of Saddam Hussein, whose worst crimes were supported by the US. Kurdish society was further devastated by the US/UK-initiated UN sanctions in the 1990s. After the US-led invasion in 2003, as the security situation deteriorated in southern and central Iraq, thousands of displaced persons fled to the KRG-administered area in the north. More recently, northern border villages have been attacked by Turkey, a US ally, and Iran, displacing thousands more. "While the conflict in Iraq is no longer featured prominently in our headlines," says Mr Sooden, "the suffering of the people in Iraq, for which our Government shares responsibility, continues."

Mr Sooden says he has looked forward to working with CPT again for some time now. "The Kurds in Iraq are asking for help to stop foreign countries from interfering in their affairs," he says, "and the people of occupied Iraq are telling us that the coalition forces must withdraw: their presence is increasing the level of violence. That is quite apart from the fact that the US-led invasion of Iraq is the 'supreme international crime', encompassing all the evil that follows, in the words of the Nuremberg Tribunal."

Previously in June 2008, Mr Sooden was assaulted, detained and forcibly deported by Israeli authorities while attempting to enter the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) to do human rights work with the International Solidarity Movement.

CPT is a small but integral part of the non-violent movement in Iraq. Its mission is to reduce violence and promote the resolution of conflict through non-violent means. It has had a presence in Iraq since October 2002, first in Baghdad, then, since November 2006, in the Kurdish north.

In the unlikely event he is kidnapped, he asks that no ransom be paid, nor armed intervention be used to secure his release. The CPT project in Kurdistan is operating in a security environment that is better, at present, than that of its projects in Colombia and the OPT.

Mr Sooden's observations are archived at <http://www.converge.org.nz/pma/niraq09.htm> He is available for interview as soon he returns from Iraq:

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