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The Trip To Northern Iraq Margareta Viklund Chairperson of the Swedish Committee for Assyrians

Editor's note: the following is an excerpt from the report. The full report is available [in Swedish](#)

The visits to different institutions and organisations were very male dominated. I was often the only woman among many men. But they had however made sure I would meet with representatives of women's organizations in different parts of the region.

The common theme during the different meetings with the women was that most of them felt pushed aside in two ways. On one hand they feel totally discriminated against in the field of politics and on the other hand they are opposed in different ways because they are Assyrians. It is as if the potential and possibilities of the women's activities seem to be a threat.

The situation felt well-known from other countries, even if the conditions are fairly different.

The Assyrian women's organizations don't have their own facilities except for one exceptional case. They seem forced to combine their own activities, such as meetings and education, with an activity for children, such as kinder garden. This gives the signal that their activities are not important enough. Instead they have to combine their activities with traditional women's chores - taking care of children. They are themselves indoctrinated in their society's view of women to a level that makes them unable to think of this as a problem. For them it's rather something obvious that women are always care takers. But the wish for their own facilities was however, according to my understanding, very strong among most of them.

In many different places we visited, the women told us that the big Kurdish party, the KDP, did everything in order to sabotage the activities of the Assyrian women and throw a spanner in the works. The Kurds and other adversaries evidently comprehend the strength and the power which lies in the work of the women. For example, the day nursery in Arbil is very popular and plays a big role for the children whose mothers work outside home. The sabotage against the nursery came in the form of higher salaries for women who wanted to place their children there. The women were offered higher salaries than they could have on the open labour market if they stayed at home and took care of their children themselves. In this way the biggest Kurdish party "bought" votes ahead of the important elections. Many women didn't allow themselves to be taken in a trap of political obligations and chose to place their children in the popular day nursery despite the enticement.

The KDP have also, through their "bought" Assyrian member, the politician Sargis Aghajan, built day nurseries almost wall to wall with the nurseries of the women's organisations in order to drive the Assyrian women's day nurseries and women's centres out of business.

This was most evident in Arbil. But the KDP had yet not succeeded.

Similar activities to try to stop the efforts of the women are going on in different places.

In Baghdede, a town in the Nineveh plains we paid a visit to, the KDP had taken over the facility of the women's organization, sabotaged their activities in different ways and replaced them by "buying" their members. The organisation is on its way to die and the main wish of the board was to have their own facility so they could regain their activities again. Despite having lost their facility the needs and wishes of the many women who didn't allow themselves to be fooled were still there.

The Nineveh area, Baghdede

Six women were waiting outside what could be best described as a hen's house, close to the big spacious headquarters of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, the ADM, which is the main independent political party of the Assyrians. The six women who were awaiting us constitute the core of the women's organization of Baghdede.

They informed us that Assyrian women are "bought" also in their town by the Kurdish political party KDP. The aim is to persuade the women so they will not seek employment.

The women are given a "salary" which is often higher than what they would get if they went to work. They must sign a contract which says they bind themselves not to cooperate with any other organization than the one which gave them the salary, the KDP.

The Assyrian women's organization in Baghdede was weakened this way as they lost most of their members. The KDP however were guaranteed more votes in the coming election. It's not only the KDP who are working against the women. There is also a group within the church, supported by Sargis Aghajan, the Assyrian high ranking member of the KDP. Even the church gives the women special contributions if they leave the Assyrian organizations and promise not to cooperate with the ADM or the Assyrian women's organization. A so called cooperation organization within the church took over the facility of the women's organization and all its furnishings, such as sewing machines and computers, without paying a cent. The facility has not been

returned to the women's organization despite a court ruling that it must be returned. An American organization had financed the building of the facility for the Assyrian women's organization.

Currently they have no other place where they can have their activities other than in the "hen's house" which the ADM has given them. They used to cooperate with other national organizations. But today they are more internationally oriented and they seek contact and cooperation with international women's organizations. They have sister organizations in Canada and the USA.

"If we owned a facility, a place of our own, no one would be able to take it from us", was their strongest wish.

"They can use any methods they like, fright, threats or anything, but in the long run they wouldn't be able to disturb our democratic right," the women explained.

The opponents have careful control over which homes and which women the Assyrian women have contacted in the different areas. They approach them and offer them similar things in order to sabotage the work of the Assyrian women. They told us of a study course organized by the opponents for women wanting to become nurses. The participants were persuaded during the entire course to leave the Assyrian women's organization and join theirs. But the becoming nurses said no and resisted.

The opponents of the women's organization are thus working against them in different ways and they often use the media. They offer women money if they speak or write disparaging about the Assyrian organization.

Despite this the chairwoman and the other women in Baghdede are continuing to perform non-profit work through their organization. They have a strong fighting spirit and they want to work for their country's future and their own rights.

They explained to us that the goal of their activities can be summoned with the sentence; "Education for the future".

The women also told us they don't think they should have too close relations with other religions because there is a risk they will be obliterated and disappear.

"The traditions must be preserved", they said.

The leader in the group expressed the thought that "the harassment should actually be the other way around." By that she meant that those who are doing the right things should harass those who are doing the wrong things. There should be a special authority to turn to for those who are doing the right things. But that authority doesn't exist. Justice, human rights and freedom doesn't exist even in the so called "safe" north Iraq.

I asked them if there's any other Assyrian political organization other than the ADM in their area. They replied there's no other. If there would be any other, it would only exist on papers, they replied.

Baretleh

The Assyrian women's organization in Baretleh has no facility of their own since eight months ago. They were forced to leave their place because of economical reasons. Many refugees came from troubled places and it caused the rents to sky rise, forcing them to leave their facility. The rent was originally only 100 USD but it was raised to 500 USD. The ADM has given them a small place close to its headquarters. They used to arrange many activities but the current situation has forced them to cut down on a lot.

They wish for facilities and economical recourses, just as several other branches of the organization. They didn't think there are any problems with attracting members or participants to the different activities. They used to have different activities and courses, such as computer knowledge, sewing, personal development of women and hairdresser profession. They also used to have a successful nursery with 60 children, despite lacking things such as electricity. They have also organized parties of different kinds. The ADM and the Assyrian Aid Society, the AAS, have contributed with some small amounts of money.

They told us that the Kurdish women in Mosul have an organization and are renting a place for 800 USD. But now the Kurdish women are coming to Baretleh in order to take over the Assyrian women's activities. Sargis Aghajan didn't need to put any effort on their town because the Assyrian women's activities are as good as dead, said the women.

The women's federation had strong support from the ADM during the big celebration of the Assyrian New Year on the first of April this year.

Some new persons, men and women, joined our meeting as we were talking.

We were informed there are ongoing negotiations with the Kurds. The Assyrians have no particular hope that the negotiations will be successful.

"They are already inside our areas", they said.

"The Kurds buy members, infiltrate, invade and they have a clear purpose. They give big amounts of money to individuals and organizations. Those who work with them can receive several millions. They know the ADM represents the Assyrian people and therefore they want to destroy the organization."

For the Kurds today, it's all about having as much influence and power as possible so they can claim for themselves the biggest area possible during any coming negotiations. They do what ever they can in order to ignore the ADM and instead support other

organizations which can create hostility towards the ADM and other independent Assyrian organizations, such as the women's organization. The persons present in the meeting underlined though that one cannot buy neither Assyrian men nor women who are fighting for the rights of their people.

They said that we wouldn't be able to comprehend the entire situation of the people because of the circumstances. For example, people can't go out to have fun or be happy. The atmosphere isn't the same as before. The Assyrians like to work but there's not enough work for everybody. Many emigrate because they are persecuted, discriminated against and stopped from their activities and human rights. There is no Assyrian family that hasn't a relative who has fled to another country. The Assyrian people are peace loving. They have many times lost their rights and belongings, such as houses and lands just because they are peaceful and don't want to fight. They rather give everything they own than to start a war or other disturbances.

We continued towards Nohadra after they gave us some presents.

We travelled fast through a beautiful hilly landscape. We meet American and Iraqi soldiers in big, heavy war vehicles which everybody gave way to. We passed several Kurdish check points, Assyrian, Arabic and Kurdish villages and villages inhabited by Yezidies. We also passed by villages which were once Assyrian but which the Kurds took over by driving the Assyrians away. We travelled on carefully chosen roads, because of the security situation, passed large fields of already mature wheat, big olive groves, grape wine farms and giant silos. We saw a very old church which has become a monastery among the mountains.

Nohadra (called Dohuk by Kurds)

We finally arrived in Nohadra, a city of one million inhabitants, solely inhabited by Assyrians till the 60s. The city has now a mixed population with a Kurdish majority. We were driven directly to the headquarters of the ADM, where a group of 17 men welcomed us. They immediately contacted the chairperson of the Assyrian women's organization in Nohadra, probably to give me some female company and a person whom I could communicate with in English.

They told us a little bit about our schedule in Nohadra. We told them what we wanted to see and about our errand, but they seemed to know everything about it already. They told us the ADM section of Nohadra was established in 1992. They publish a journal, the star of Bethnahrin. Similar sections of the ADM were also established in other areas after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

The ADM organization works independently and has occasional gatherings to discuss administrative and other organizational issues. They also discuss how they would like to build up the Nineveh area and to have it as a separate area, well-protected by international organizations. The ADM played a big and important role during the first democratic elections in Iraq. The members acted as election observers and reported about electoral rigging where it had occurred. They worked to make that information known to the rest of the world and to the highest judicial levels.

ADM supports many activities. Its newspaper has a top priority. The organization has no support from the government or other authorities, but it has received some international support. Even the Assyrian Aid Society has supported the ADM by building their headquarters and helped to spread 16 books. The board of directors consist of seven regular directors and two deputies. They have around 400 members supporting them, of whom many are active. They have a library with 1700 books.

I felt it as if they knew almost everything about us. For example, they knew I had been severely ill. They had been praying for me and were therefore extra happy to see me in good health. They expressed their gratitude for our visit. We felt incredibly welcomed. One can't stop from liking the Assyrian people, a feeling which became even stronger after the days in Nohadra and its surroundings.

It was nice to sit in the garden of the ADM headquarters under the evening sun after the long, warm trip from Arbil, with all the stops on the way and all the encounters with different people. The chairperson of the women's federation joined us soon. She was also to be our hostess during our stay in Nohadra.

The women's organization in Nohadra

The women's organization in Nohadra was established in 1992 and has nearly 270 members. Their activities cover the whole of Nohadra and its surroundings. They have a very nice and well-managed preschool with educated staff. Around 60-80 children come here every day in two shifts. The children are served breakfast, lunch and a snack. The staffs are well-educated with a principal, superintendent and teachers. The children are aged between 1 - 6 years.

The transportation of the children constitutes a big problem. They currently hire a bus but they are in need of having their own transport vehicle.

The facilities of the women's organization and the preschool are in a house, close to the head office of the AAS. They have similar activities as the women's organization in Arbil. The goal and the ambitions of the activities are high and the program is extensive. The women arrange courses, seminars and have other educations and information about women and the situation of children, human rights, democracy, sewing, computer education etc.

And they also arrange courses for the youth, teaching them for example how teenagers should behave towards each other. They also have courses for women, both members and non-members, teaching them English, health care and so on. There are also courses to learn Arabic and also Assyrian for women who have come here from Baghdad. They usually have around 25-30 persons enlist in each course.

The women's organization played a big role in the administration and organization of the big Assyrian New Year march on the first of April 2007. Some 60 000 Assyrians marched in the streets of Nohadra and reports of the event were spread to the entire world.

What is most distinguishable with the women's organization in Nohadra is the growing net of contacts with Assyrian women in the many villages. They have courses in the different villages in order to raise the level of knowledge of the women and increase their self confidence. The chairperson is out in the different villages almost every evening. The desire for knowledge is very strong. The Assyrian Aid Society supports the courses with economical contributions. Even Muslim women attend the different courses.

The women's organization has also a good cooperation with Diakonia, an aid organization based in Sweden, Concordia from the USA, UNICEF, different Muslim and Kurdish organizations.

They have had different seminars about children and tried to measure the level of talent among them. They also arranged a knowledge competition for the children. The girls won.

The women's organization had a visit from the USA in 1999. The visitors took with them different things and arranged an exhibition when they went back to the USA. The Americans sent money earned through the exhibition to the children who had participated in the knowledge competition.

The UNICEF wanted the women's organization to cooperate with the Kurds on a project for Children, but it didn't work. The differences in views about children and family were too grave.

There is also a relatively newly established youth centre in Nohadra which is developing.

Barwar

There are many Assyrians in the heart of Barwar in the Nohadra area. The information I got says 22 out of a total of 27 villages are populated by Assyrians only. Seven of the 27 villages are not built for living there in the winter. Many people who can't afford fuel are cold and endure hardships during winter.

I found a priest at the Eastern Assyrian Church in the area who had been living in Sweden before. He had returned so he could serve his people. He told me the people in the villages live in great poverty. They have almost no money, no jobs and no food. They live under very harsh circumstances.

The Kurds, who are invading the land from all directions, are taking over villages and pieces of land although they don't have the right to do so. But no one is there to help the Assyrians to claim their rights. The invaders say they are all living in a democracy and that means for them it is up to everyone to grab what he can. Their aim is to make the Assyrians leave the land so they can stay and claim it.

A visit to the Assyrian Aid Society (AAS) The AAS was established in 1991 in response to the bad situation at the time. Many had fled because of the Gulf war. The first mission was to help the refugees. When northern Iraq became a free zone under the protection of the UN the AAS started helping refugees to find a place to live in and provided them with the most necessary needs such as tents, clothes and medicines. Thereafter they began to restore deserted villages, build churches and offered people the possibility to farm the land so their minds would be occupied by other things than what had struck them. Water is connected with the life of both humans and nature and therefore the water issue was important. The AAS tried to help the people in different ways so they would survive and maybe find a future in Northern Iraq. They helped people renew the roofs of the houses so they could live in them. One of the first irrigation channels was built with funds from the Swedish Committee for Assyrians. It was a project which was also supported by SIDA, the Swedish government's organ for international aid.

The AAS began relatively early to arrange for the education of the children. It was a major procedure which involved education of teachers and arrangement of transports so the children could get to the schools. The salaries of the teachers were paid for by the AAS and it meant a heavy expense. They started with one school, the Nohadra School. Today the AAS is operating 19 schools in Nohadra, two in Arbil, two in Nineve, one in Baghdad and two in Kirkuk. They have yet not received any money from the school department for the transportation of the children in Nohadra. There are currently 24 bus lines transporting the children for a cost of 11,330 USD per month.

The AAS have been searching for other ways to have the transportation costs financed but no alternative has presented itself yet. The bills are paid until April, so they are close to a crisis. The AAS has also other costs for the schools which need to be financed in other ways, for example the transportation of the teachers to the schools. There are 1700 students in the upper secondary school in Nohadra. The upper secondary school of Arbil has 86 students and they are planning an upper secondary school in Ninve. 1200 students are only studying Assyrian and religion. The bad circumstances are unfortunately slowing down the school activity. The biggest problem is the economy. The AAS are often forced to borrow money to cover for costs.

"But even if we had to sell our clothes we would continue our mission", said the president of the AAS. He explained the reason why they would not let themselves be defeated or give up: "No one can take over our activity. Without the children and the young there is no future."

One of the schools in Nohadra lies close to the head quarters of the AAS.

There is also a boarding school in Nohadra for a total of 125 students from places such as Baghdad. A cook, a cleaner and

other staff are also living in the school. Even teachers who don't have a home are staying at the boarding school. The total cost for the boarding school during the month of Mars alone was 8 680 USD. Without this boarding school, built in 2002, the students, 72 boys and 53 girls, would have remained illiterate or would have been forced to join Kurdish KDP or, as in Saddams time, the Baath party. Kurdish children are also welcomed to the school. Last summer for example they welcomed two Kurdish girls.

The AAS has a base program consisting of food, agriculture and medicines. They also support different teams of doctors who travel to the different villages and teach about first help, among other things.

They are also involved in court proceedings concerning land grabbing, which is mostly carried out by Kurds. They mentioned a man who had sold a piece of land to a Kurd. Regular papers were filled in and signed but they were never turned in to the authorities. The Assyrian man had regretted the sale. The case went to court and the deal was declared invalid. The money was supposed to be returned and the Kurd was supposed to leave the land. But the Kurd refused to leave and continued as if nothing had happened.

Many Assyrian youth in need of money are leaving the country to seek a better life, mostly in Canada. Even Sweden has a large Assyrian community.

The youth organization, Karemlesh

We were greeted warmly in the town of Karemlesh in the Nineveh area by a waiting group of young people, all boys who are scouts. The Assyrian youth organization in northern Iraq has been around since 1991. This local branch was founded in 2003. The goal and strife of the youth organization is that the Assyrians will receive the rights which are given to others and the rights given to them by the Iraqi constitution. They suffer from being an indigenous population which is discriminated against in different contexts.

The wishes of the youths were to not to be ignored or forgotten but to be seen and met as everyone else. It is time to invest in their area and make sure they are not forgotten. It is plain to see that they are being ignored by the central, regional and local authorities as well. The Assyrians have one representative in the government in Baghdad, Younadam Kanna. But the youth feel he is to far away.

The young boys, who represent the student's council, explained that they are suffering from both political and other opposition which has consequences on the safety of the Assyrians.

The nearest university is in Mosul and the students have to be transported there, something which causes great problems because of the safety situation. Sometimes they cannot go to school because of the unrest. They are in need of a youth centre with, among other things, a library where they can gather. The student's council receives some support from the ADM.

I asked them what would benefit their people and they replied: "To have our own protected zone, which is not connected to the Kurdish region. The Kurds are working eagerly and in a menacing way to have the Assyrians join the Kurdish region."

"We have no one to support us. We wish for moral support, exchange programs and economical support for our studies from abroad. We need contacts and friends". The aim of the youth organization is high and it can materialize with help from abroad.

They want to teach and be taught in human rights and other important issues. They want to have a historic perspective on their origin. They were careful to point out they are not a racist organization but they want to know what their rights are. For this they need help and support from outside. They want to cooperate with other youth organizations, preferably non political organizations. But it's important that anyone travelling to Iraq must make sure they have contact with the right persons, so they will hear the truth. It's important that one meets other than those who represent the Kurds, either directly or indirectly.

During our conversation I was told the Kurds are keeping a close eye on the Assyrians all the time. They can interrogate people without any reason. Sargis Aghajan, the Assyrian which is working for the Kurds and which everyone is talking about is said to have received 240 million USD. The boys claim that the USA knows that the money didn't end up in the hands of elected Assyrian representatives but in the hands of persons that are bribed in one way or the other to join the KDP.

A visit to Sarsink

We visited the village of Sarsink during one of our trips in the area. We were as usual greeted warmly by the ADM member of the village who showed great happiness and appreciation for our visit.

The villagers were well aware of the Swedish committee for Assyrians and showed great gratitude and thankfulness for the project our committee had financed in their village. They also knew that I was stopped from entering Iraq from the Turkish side of the border in 1998. At that time I was supposed to visit Nohadra and Sarsink with William Adam, another member of the Swedish Committee for Assyrians. We were supposed to hand over the rest of the money for the project and also see how the irrigation channel project was advancing.

But I was never allowed to cross the border into Iraq.

Their happiness and thankfulness for the irrigation channel was overwhelming and can't be described. The reception committee told us they were sorry only a few of the villagers turned out to greet us. They didn't dare to tell everybody about our visit. They were afraid the word could spread and that too many persons would gather.

We inspected the irrigation channel which at this time didn't carry any water to the village. They explained to us that the people would not have been able to remain in the village if it wasn't for the channel. It was fantastic to finally see this, in many eyes insignificant, water channel and realize its meaning for the survival of many people. It was as if I and my committee received a great gift. We inspected many parts of the channel and came eventually uphill to its source, near the foot of the mountain. It was a nice time in the evening to come to this humble but vital water source.

But there are a couple of things that cause worry in the village. The rather newly arrived Kurds, who are trying to drive away the Assyrians in Sarsink, have as in many other places, taken approximately half of the water from the channel and led it to their places - places they have more or less taken from Assyrians. In order to stop the Kurds from taking even more water the Assyrians have put a very big and heavy rock in front of the water source.

When we went back to the village, which lies on a mountainside, I could not but admire its fresh, dazzling verdure and the blossoming fruit trees. Who could have believed that a small channel made of concrete could mean so much for so many?

The Swedish committee for Assyrians has financed another irrigation channel in another village as well but we didn't have time to pay a visit. I was told it was not in the same good condition as the one in Sarsink.

Tellesqof

During the trip from Nohadra back to Arbil we stopped in the city of Tellesqof to change car and driver, among other things. We actually didn't want to stop in Tellesqof because it had recently been struck by a bomb outside the Kurdish headquarters which lies across the street from an Assyrian school. But we had to obey the drivers; they decided the routes and the stops.

Representatives from the ADM welcomed us in the same warm manners as in other places. They told us about the bomb attack among other things and also about how they feel surrounded from all sides by the Kurds. Tellesqof, which is a purely Assyrian town, is forced to have Kurdish guards watching its entrances. The bomb was aimed for the Kurds but the Assyrian civil population suffered most. One can wonder whether or not this was the intention after all. When the Kurds invade an Assyrian village or town they usually place their head quarter in the vicinity of a central Assyrian institution. In this case it was the school. This led to many Assyrians being injured badly, the death toll was also high. The Kurds escaped from the blast pretty unharmed. Now the well guarded Kurdish head quarters was moved next to the less guarded ADM head quarters.

The Kurdish farmer

We arrived in the heart of Berva after several hours of travel on winding mountain roads through steep hills and deep valleys. We passed many fortified mountain tops with soldiers from the Iraqi army on one mountain top, Turkish soldiers on another, Kurdish soldiers on a third, Americans and Iraqis on a fourth and, as a matter of fact, Israeli soldiers on the fifth, just to mention some of the fortified hills. The atmosphere was tense.

We stopped and talked to a Kurdish farmer who was walking with his donkey along the road. He told us that the village we were crossing had been taken over by Kurds. The Kurds fought over the best pieces of land, the soil there is fertile and belonged actually to Assyrians, but the Kurds forced the Assyrians to sell their land for small amounts of money. "And now we are here harassing them. By forcing them to sell to us Kurds we have destroyed their village and the work they were doing," was his honest and unusual statement. "The Assyrians got some few cents as payment for their land and property. Now we Kurds refuse to leave the village. The Kurdish government keeps telling the Assyrians that there is no doubt the Kurds shall return the village, but to us Kurds the Kurdish government says to remain in the village.

Obviously there's no law or justice. The strong and armed ones win.

Final thoughts and conclusions

First of all, the Swedish Committee has now decided to establish a women's centre in northern Iraq. The projected will be mostly financed by the Swedish government's aid program.

Many have asked me about how it was in Iraq since my return. It hasn't been easy to answer this question. I tell them I saw tears for lost relatives and friends, I heard people talk about mass murder on a grand scale, about villages that were destroyed, about farms and houses the Assyrians have been forced to abandon because of harassments, threats and persecution; all of this mostly to satisfy the craving of the Kurds for power and belongings. I saw Kurdish guards outside villages only inhabited by Assyrians. Obviously each step of the Assyrians must be registered. I also saw happiness and glimpses of hope and confidence, at the same time as I saw great despair and worry for the future. I saw people support each other, but I also saw suspicion towards on another. I experienced great openness and warmth but also the contrary. With other words, the trip was overwhelming. It took many days to recover from it. It has probably affected me more than I thought it would have.

We visited many villages and we were well guarded and protected by our friends. We visited ancient places and modern buildings. We acquainted ourselves with the work of the women but we saw also how the "enemy" could buy people and make them allies in a policy which these men and women didn't like in first place.

The aim of the largest Kurdish party, the KDP, with its strategy and double messages, puts an incredible strain on the people who are vulnerable both economically and in other ways. The policies if the KDP are more or less obvious for a foreigner. The Assyrians who accept the policies of the KDP most certainly feel they have let down their people but they find themselves in a situation best described as a fox trap. One can't judge them.

I met families with teenagers who had been offered to move to relatives in other countries, but as one woman said: "I can't leave my people. I am needed here. I feel and know that this is where I must and shall remain".

This is a woman whose husband had been in prison for his political belief. This is courage!

What is primarily keeping the people together and the spirit high in northern Iraq is the hope for their own zone, their own area where they can live in safety. They have a very, very strong wish for their own Assyrian area on historical Assyrian land, where they can decide things themselves, preferably under UN protection, but still their own area. This wish is very strong at the same time as they are worried that someone or something will stop them on their way to have an area.

The north of Iraq is a very interesting area with many different prospective buyers. I am referring to the oil in first hand. We have also lately seen and heard about targeted terror attacks against Christian priests and other clergy. Could it possible be a warning of what is awaiting them?

I ask God it's not this way, but the threat is always there in Iraq. The serious threat was also felt there in northern Iraq. It was in the air, in people's faces and in the fear and eagerness to protect us all the time. Our drivers and others who accompanied us were literally protecting us with their own lives.

To get a picture of the situation in Iraq one can follow what is happening in Baghdad today. The Christians of the Dora district are forced to renounce their faith and convert to Islam or pay a large amount of money to be able to remain in their own homes, in an area they have inhabited for generations. If they don't fulfil the demands they must abandon their homes and leave the city. Where are they to go?

Many try to flee to northern Iraq, where one might have a short time of peace; others flee to Jordan, Syria and Turkey. The needs and the despair are huge. We felt it and saw it.

Not to mention the terrible thing that recently happened to a priest and his three helpers in Mosul. They were Christian Assyrians, that's probably why they mustn't continue to live.

I would like to state that those courageous people, families, young and old Assyrians are fighting for all of us in the western world and their own right to exist, their human value and the right to have a Christian faith. It's our duty to stand up for them. They are needed in the Middle East, in the countries they have inhabited since time immemorial. If we don't do anything soon they won't be able to live and exist in their own country.

The western world has kept quiet long enough. It's time for churches and communities to become active and demand that Assyrians be given the right to live in their own country and exercise their faith. All churches should appoint a day for prayers for the well being of the Christians of the Middle East, and especially for those in Iraq. All churches in the entire Sweden, entire Europe, America, Australia, Africa, Asia, the entire world.

The Swedish government and parliament must act.

The parliament of the European Union must act.

The United Nations must open its eyes to what is happening in Iraq and give the Christians the protection they need and are entitled to.

The United States must act.

All ambassadors in the whole world must notify their Iraqi colleagues on what is happening in Iraq, so it may be stopped!

The world can't allow the mass persecution and mass killing of Assyrians to continue.

It's time to act. The Assyrians have suffered enough!

Stockholm, 9 June 2007

Translated by Hanna Idris.