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Guest Editorial

The Indigenous Christians of Iraq ChaldoAssyrian National Council of America

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(AINA) -- The world at large recognizes the importance of the current situation in Iraq. Less well known is the crisis we Chaldeans/Assyrians/Syriacs face, a crisis in which events will determine whether our people will survive in one of the last nations of our indigenous homeland where we retain a sustainable population. No group is more crucially influenced by the constantly evolving events in Iraq than the Christians of all the Middle East. Of these Christians, most directly involved are our own community members -- the ChaldoAssyrians -- the largest compact Aramaic-speaking community left in the world.

We have a brave and courageous history in our homeland as holders of the ancient heritage of early Mesopotamia. Since the First Century after Christ our steadfast allegiance to our Eastern form of Christianity, our particular Syriac heritage, and our unyielding cohesiveness in the face of persistent attempts to force our people away from their traditions and social coherence have helped us form strong reliance on both our religious ideals and our civic and ecclesial leaders. Since the beginning of the last century our people have been faced with horrible waves of violence and persecution, war and discrimination. Today, we face a terrible crisis -- one that will determine whether there shall remain a future for native Christian populations anywhere in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq.

The ongoing events in Iraq leading to this political/security crisis cannot be either ignored or accepted without the participation of Iraqi Christians. Our people, as one nation, require not only the dedication and continued perseverance of civic activists, but also the focus of the hearts and minds of our religious leaders and institutions. Accordingly, at this critical juncture, we turn to both our civic and ecclesial leaders to demand that actions and speeches deepening the communal divisions that weaken us as a people be brought to an end. Divisions encouraged by such acts and speeches are exploited by those seeking to remove our people as a force, both inside and outside Iraq. We should not be driven to choose sides when no sides should exist, and our communities should not work against themselves. There is action that must be taken with a unified purpose so that we may survive in Iraq. We must work with each other and achieve the interests of our people, not of those who gain by our decimation.

We recognize that only with a united front will we be able to assure the acquisition of political, economic and cultural rights guaranteed under international law and long due in light of our indigenous and millennia-old history in Iraq. If we allow senseless and hateful attacks among each other, and those who separate us along denominational or tribal lines, to rule the day, we will see our presence in our homeland systematically dwindle. People with a known history of attempts to cause hate and separation among our people should not be supported with resources or given public platforms to further divide. Our own people will lose hope when our leadership cannot be trusted to direct them towards unification instead of division and discrimination. Our supporters inside and outside Iraq too will come to regard the Iraqi Christians as incapable of cooperation and inclined instead toward infighting, personal aggrandizement or self-glorification.

Our principles in bringing such ideals among our people, especially in Iraq are based on the employment of common sense rules of fairness, mutual respect and reciprocal exchange among all segments/folds of our people, particularly in Iraq. Such rules prompt us to respect that various designations, such as Assyrian, Chaldean and Syriac, are equal and complimentary. We recognize that these terms grow out of a long history, which for centuries fostered isolation and division. At the same time, they make us richer and bring together in a cultural unity the totality of our history and the fulfillment of our presence and the vision of our future. We further realize that as a condition for clarity of such rules of fairness and mutual, reciprocal respect, we ought to recognize the fact that the term Syriac fully and justifiably defines our common Mesopotamian heritage and particular usage of the Aramaic language.

We now come before all of our civic and religious leaders to accept the path of preserving a sustained, legitimate and effective presence for our people in Iraq. We, therefore, strongly urge the following:

- Issue a definitive statement, as individuals, institutions and cooperative groups not only against divisiveness and extremism but also in favor of unity, collaboration and cooperation.
- Preach the unification of our people in words and promulgate in action an urgent policy to demand that our people gain a unified category in the new Iraqi constitution; one ChaldoAssyrian people proud of their Syriac language and heritage. The Iraqi interim constitution known as the "Temporary Administrative Law" (TAL) currently achieves this by using the word, "ChaldoAssyrian" to represent the Chaldean/Assyrian/Syriac people in Iraq.
- Help our community outside and inside Iraq to realize that, as Christians living in Muslim-majority countries, they must resist and forcefully oppose any establishment of Islamic governance, which shall force public adherence to religious

customs not our own.

- Urge our leaders in Iraq, religious and secular, to understand the danger of separatist rhetoric in the name of some false form of super patriotism and the danger of falling into the trap of "divide and rule" to which our community has been lately subjected.
- Urge and support our civic Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syriac leaders in Iraq towards building a "Unified ChaldoAssyrian Political Coalition," with fair, balanced, and qualified representation from all factions of our community, in preparation for the next Iraqi elections.

Only when we Chaldeans/Assyrians/Syriacs stand united and strong, in reciprocity and mutual respect will we be able to hold back the flight of our people from their homes and villages in Iraq. We are, in many respects, the hope of all Christians in the Middle East, for we stand as standard bearers to the beleaguered modern history of Christians in their original homelands. We, the earliest Christians and the last speakers of the language of Jesus Christ, with the help of God, through our religious and civic leaders, must unite and stand strong. Others will take courage from publicly hearing from their respected leaders what we all know to be true: we are one people, of one origin, one culture and one homeland. This is said of course, despite the minor cultural and religious distinction among our people. We nevertheless consider these distinctions as complimentary, not contradictory to our common ChaldoAssyrian identity and Syriac language and heritage.

We all must therefore accept that our choices together reshape the world available to our next generation. Our actions must be more effective than those of our modern forefathers. This is a critical moment in our history and future. We can survive in Iraq in peace and prosperity and as equals proud and faithful to their one nation and common culture. We believe this is possible only through the unified action of our people. We ask you to join us.

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Dr. Eden Naby, Middle East Specialist
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