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Guest Editorial

How Long Will the Persecution of Assyrians Be Ignored?

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(AINA) -- Two queues, on each side of the same street. One of them leads to the new City Hall in Södertälje, where a stunt with two central operators takes place: The American embassy and Södertälje's municipality management have initiated cooperation. It's a way for the U.S. to pay back the Swedish county for accepting more Iraqi refugees than the whole of the U.S. The other queue leads to the Syriac-Orthodox Church. My cousin's fourteen-year-old child is going to be buried.

When the funeral is over and we are carrying the coffin to the grave, I see two people at a corner, pointing at me and whispering something. Nothing strange about that -- it is a part of my profession.

When we return from the cemetery and go back to one of the rooms at the church to eat together, two of my cousin's children, both teenagers, make sure to sneak off to City Hall.

When I asked how it had been, one of the teenagers shrugged his shoulders and said, "we didn't understand anything. It was mainly journalists and photographers who asked Swedish politicians and American diplomats questions. It was a very strange occasion, as if the whole thing was staged, as if it was a film." Then he continued, "Two women are standing outside the gate, they want to know whether you want to talk to them. They promise that it won't take more than a few minutes."

I sighed; I don't need new scoops or new Iraqi asylum dossiers to help out with.

Ten minutes passed and I talked to some relatives from Germany who had come to the funeral.

"Those women are still outside the church gate," a cousin said.

I went out. They hardly looked at me. I looked at them, and their clothes gave a clear indication that they were asylum seekers. They were awfully embarrassed and nervous for intruding and could hardly say a word. I asked questions and they started slowly to reveal their errand. One of them had fled from Mosul and the other from Baghdad. Both of them had applied for asylum and were still waiting for a decision. I knew that this would take more than a few minutes. I had to go through their applications, learn more about their situation in Sweden and Södertälje and find out more about their families in Iraq.

The woman from Mosul, let's call her Eva, fled eight months ago. She was one of the last Christian Assyrians in her area. She was stubborn enough not to abandon her home and her beauty salon. Her husband had tried to persuade her but she refused to let someone else control her life, occupy her home and business. Today she is regretful. The Islamic extremists were looking for her, wanted to kill her. She fled without due care or attention -- wearing a headscarf. She pretended to be a Muslim and managed to get to first the north of Iraq and then to Turkey where she paid 15, 000 American dollars to a smuggler and arrived in Södertälje.

Her family, husband and four children, are among over thousands of Christian families who fled from Mosul last weekend. Elisabeth, the woman from Baghdad, makes us some coffee while Eva and I sit down on the kitchen chairs that Assyrians who have lived in Sweden for a long time have donated to them. She digs out her asylum documents and I'm just about to read them when we are being interrupted by her mobile phone ringing. The call doesn't last more than a few minutes before she collapses. One of her daughters has a seizure and her husband doesn't know what to do in order to help the girl.

I try to hold back my tears, stay professional, don't show any emotions but I fail. When her husband hangs up, Elisabeth hugs her and at the same time tells me, "They have taken everything from us, every single thing, and now our relatives are even going to die in tents. Why, why doesn't anyone put an end to the persecution of the Christians in Iraq?"

I wished I could answer that question but I can't. I ask whether they know what happened to the decision that was taken about the police force in June earlier this year. The Iraqi government together with the Americans was supposed to educate more than 700 policemen from the minority populations so that they could protect the people.

"One of the policemen is my cousin. We have been cheated in this case as well. Out of the 711 who were supposed to get the training, only 270 actually received it and they moved them from the Nineveh Plain to supervise some insignificant houses in Mosul, anything that will make us unable to make our own decisions. Anything to make us feel uneasy and unsafe," Elisabeth says, shouting.

Eva apologizes for their behavior and they calm down. I read through her asylum application and ask a few questions and within a few minutes she breaks down again. My questions have reminded her of their suffering and the fact that one of the people who were brutally killed in Mosul last week was one of her friends.

Later that evening, on the news, I hear a reporter ask the American ambassador, Michael Woods, about the event in Södertälje. Is the event a sign of the U.S. feeling guilty? "Of course I feel guilty. This trade fair is a way to give something back. It's not acceptable that a small county such as Södertälje takes more Iraqi refugees than the whole of the U.S."

I can imagine Eva's family and other asylum seekers in the tents in northern Iraq and wonder if anyone has a guilty conscience for what has hit these people. I also wonder if the Swedish Migration Board, whose Director General I've written to this week and who has promised to take my requests further, actually will make the right decisions and differentiate between Iraqi and Iraqi. Where can you send Eva? She is not safe anywhere in Iraq -- not until Assyrians and other minorities in the Nineveh Plain have been given a protection zone or self administration where they can feel safe.

*[Nuri Kino](#) is a journalist in Sweden specializing in investigative journalism, and is one of the most highly awarded journalists in Europe ([CV](#)). He is an Assyrian from Turkey. His documentary, *Assyriska: a National team without a Nation*, was awarded *The Golden Palm* at the 2006 Beverly Hills Film festival.*

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