



Iraq's Christians Flee As Extremist Threat Worsens

Posted GMT 10-21-2006 16:8:45

BAGHDAD -- The blackened shells of five cars still sit in front of the Church of the Virgin Mary here, stark reminders of a bomb blast that killed two people after a recent Sunday Mass.

In the northern city of Mosul, a priest from the Syriac Orthodox Church was kidnapped last week. His church complied with his captors' demands and put up posters denouncing recent comments made by the pope about Islam, but he was killed anyway. The police found his beheaded body on Wednesday.

Muslim fury over Pope Benedict XVI's public reflections on Islam in Germany a month ago -- when he quoted a 14th-century Byzantine emperor as calling Islam "evil and inhuman" -- has subsided elsewhere, but repercussions continue to reverberate in Iraq, bringing a new level of threat to an already shrinking Christian population.

Several extremist groups threatened to kill all Christians unless the pope apologized. Sunni and Shiite clerics united in the condemnation, calling the comments an insult to Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. In Baghdad, many churches canceled services after receiving threats. Some have not met since.

"After the pope's statement, people began to fear much more than before," said the Rev. Zayya Edward Khossaba, the pastor of the Church of the Virgin Mary. "The actions by fanatics have increased against Christians."

Christianity took root here near the dawn of the faith 2,000 years ago, making Iraq home to one of the world's oldest Christian communities. The country is rich in biblical significance: scholars believe the Garden of Eden described in Genesis was in Iraq; Abraham came from Ur of the Chaldees, a city in Iraq; the city of Nineveh that the prophet Jonah visited after being spit out by a giant fish was in Iraq.

Both Chaldean Catholics and Assyrian Christians, the country's largest Christian sects, still pray in Aramaic, the language of Jesus.

They have long been a tiny minority amid a sea of Islamic faith. But under Saddam Hussein, Iraq's million or so Christians for the most part coexisted peacefully with Muslims, both the dominant Sunnis and the majority Shiites.

But since Mr. Hussein's ouster, their status here has become increasingly uncertain, first because many Muslim Iraqis framed the American-led invasion as a modern crusade against Islam, and second because Christians traditionally run the country's liquor stores, anathema to many religious Muslims.

Over the past three and a half years, Christians have been subjected to a steady stream of church bombings, assassinations, kidnappings and threatening letters slipped under their doors.

Estimates of the resulting Christian exodus vary from the tens of thousands to more than 100,000, with most heading for Syria, Jordan and Turkey.

The number of Christians who remain is also uncertain. The last Iraqi census, in 1987, counted 1.4 million Christians, but many left during the 1990's when sanctions squeezed the country. Yonadam Kanna, the lone Christian member of the Iraqi Parliament, estimated the current Christian population at roughly 800,000, or about 3 percent of the population. A Chaldean Catholic auxiliary bishop, Andreos Abouna, told a British charity over the summer that there were just 600,000 Christians left, according to the Catholic News Service.

At the Church of the Virgin Mary, Father Khossaba showed a visitor the baptism forms for parishioners leaving the country who need proof of their religious affiliation for visas. Some weeks he has filled out 50 of the forms, he said, and some weeks more.

Attendance on Sundays has dwindled to four dozen or so, he said; it used to be more than 500 on average, and on Easter Sundays, before the collapse of the Hussein government, more than 1,500. Not all the missing members have left, of course; some simply stay at home on Sundays because of fears for their safety.

Assyrian International News Agency

Many Christians have relocated, changing neighborhoods or even cities. About a thousand Christian families, from Mosul, Baghdad, Basra and elsewhere, have taken refuge in Ain Kawa, a small town outside the Kurdish city of Erbil, which has become an oasis for Christians, said the Rev. Yusuf Sabri, a priest at St. Joseph's Chaldean Catholic Church there.

A Christian man with Baghdad license plates on his car who asked not to be identified said he had just arrived in Ain Kawa to inquire about moving there. A leaflet had been left at his home demanding he leave in three days. It bore the signature of Muhammad's Army, a Sunni insurgent group.

"They regarded me as an agent for the crusaders," he said.

Asaad Aziz, a 42-year-old Chaldean Catholic, is one of those trying to leave the country. After the ouster of Mr. Hussein, he bought a liquor store in a mostly Shiite neighborhood. Nine days after he opened, the store was bombed. Mr. Aziz was hospitalized for a month.

The employees rebuilt the store. But several months later, a note slipped under the door gave Mr. Aziz 48 hours to close.

"Otherwise, you will blame yourself," it said.

Mr. Aziz closed. But after an unsuccessful stint at a friend's printing company, he returned to the business he knew best, opening a liquor store in a mostly Christian neighborhood. Last month, a gunman riddled the new storefront with bullets as Mr. Aziz cowered in a back room.

He told another story: the teenage daughter of another Christian family he knows was kidnapped recently. The captors initially demanded a ransom, but later sarcastically said the pope was the only one who could release her. She was eventually killed.

"When the pope gave his statement, it destroyed any last hope that we had here," said Mr. Aziz, who has forbidden his daughters, one in high school and the other in college, to return to school.

He recently went to the Turkish Embassy to inquire about a visa but was rebuffed. At this point, he said, he will go anywhere.

"We cannot practice our rituals and we cannot bring food home to our families," he said. "That's why I want to leave the country."

Mosul, near the historic heart of Christianity in Iraq, has also become increasingly dangerous. The recently murdered priest, the Rev. Boulos Iskander Behnam, is just the latest member of the Christian community to be kidnapped or killed there.

Conditions have been especially bleak for Christians in Basra, the southern city that is dominated by radical Shiite militias. Christian women there often wear Muslim head scarves to avoid harassment from religious zealots trying to impose a strict Islamic dress code. After the pope's statement, an angry crowd burned an effigy of him.

In Baghdad, Juliet Yusef attends St. George's, the country's lone Anglican church. She, too, now wears a head scarf anytime she ventures outside her neighborhood. "I am afraid of being attacked," she said.

Dora, a neighborhood in southern Baghdad that was once heavily populated by Christians and has been plagued by sectarian violence, has now been mostly emptied of them. Christians were singled out there by insurgents who accused them of being friendly with the occupying Americans.

"They are Christian, we are Christian," said one holdout, who asked to be identified only by her first name, Suzan. "They think most likely we know each other well."

Two priests were kidnapped over the summer in Dora, although both were released, one after nearly a month.

Oddly, before the pope's comments, as sectarian violence has escalated in Baghdad in the past year, some said the situation might have actually improved for Christians as Muslim militants turned their attention on one another.

Canon Andrew White, the Anglican vicar of Baghdad, who lives in Britain but visits Iraq frequently, said his driver was kidnapped recently but was promptly released after his Sunni Arab captors discovered he was a Christian. He said his captors apologized by saying, "We thought he was Shiite."

"It must be the only occasion when being a Christian actually helped in this country," he said.

Wisam H. Habeeb and Khalid al-Ansary contributed reporting from Baghdad, and an Iraqi employee of The New York Times from Mosul.

By Michael Luo
New York Times

