



Iraqi Militias Conducting Ethnic Cleansing Campaign Against Baghdad's Christians

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Up to a dozen centres of Catholic life and worship, including a seminary, a monastery, several religious houses and at least five churches have been closed in Baghdad's Al Dora district, known as 'The Vatican of Iraq'.

About two-thirds of the 900 Christian families living there have been forced to leave as a result of Sunni militants taking control of the district and carrying out ethnic cleansing along strict religious lines.

Among the centres to have closed in Al Dora is the Babel College, which is Iraq's only theological university, used both by priests and religious as well as lay people.

The escalation in violence and extremism across Iraq, which is pitting Shia and Sunni Muslim militants in a civil war, has led to increased concerns for the survival of the minority religious groups caught in the middle.

The capture of two priests in the district, Chaldean priest Fr Saad Sirup Hanna, from St Jacob's Church and Fr Basil Yaldo, the rector of St Peter's Seminary, has left Christians in Iraq in a state of fear.

"For many of our people," said Fr Bashar Warda, "these two events provided us with a sign that we had to leave that area altogether."

Fr Warda added that wanton cruelty now grips the city.

"You see mothers outside the hospitals shouting and crying in despair. Some people doubt the existence of the devil but when you go into a hospital like that you realise that the devil is alive and well," he added.

But offering a glimmer of hope Fr Warda told how in his parish in eastern Baghdad had opened a primary school which was bringing together children of all faiths in harmony under one roof.

Using a building part-funded by Aid to the Church in Need, Fr Warda explained that of the 380 children at The Tent of Mary School, 70 percent were Muslims.

Fr Warda said: "Because of the trust that the Muslims have in our educational medical institutions, we should definitely keep them going. It is the only hope we have that some day Iraq will rise again from this terrible situation."

By John Pontifex

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