



US Urges Protection for Iraq's Assyrian Christians

Posted GMT 3-14-2007 15:29:11

WASHINGTON --- The U.S. government's religious freedom watchdog agency expressed serious concern about the growing refugee crisis in Iraq, highlighting the mainly Christian Chaldo-Assyrian community as one of the most vulnerable in the country.

In a letter this week, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) urged the U.S. government to take decisive action to allow Iraqi refugees to resettle with greater ease in the United States.

The Commission emphasized that more than 1.8 million people have been displaced from their homes inside Iraq and close to 2 million forced to seek refuge in other countries since the 2003 U.S.-led offensive.

Iraq's refugee problem was described as "alarming" and in need of more help from the U.S. government.

"The United States must act immediately to identify the most vulnerable Iraqi refugees and move quickly to resettle them in the United States," said Felice D. Gaer, chair of the Commission, in a statement released Monday.

Chaldo-Assyrians, who make up most of Iraq's Christian population, are among the most vulnerable population in the country, stated the Commission.

Although Christians compose only three percent of Iraq's 26 million people, they make up nearly half of the refugees fleeing Iraq, according to UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).

Moreover, it is estimated that about 3,000 people leave Iraq everyday due to the violence.

"Because of their (the Assyrian Christian's) small population, weak status, and lack of regional support, they have no one to protect them from all the violence," explained Paul Isaac, a spokesman for Christians for Assyrians of Iraq to The Christian Post in December.

Assyrian Christians often point out that they are Iraq's indigenous people, tracing their history back to Babylonian times.

Yet despite their ancient heritage, Christians are increasingly the target of violence -- often for money. Many Christians are shop owners and have some money or they are kidnapped to force relatives abroad to pay ransom. The money is used to buy guns and fund fighting.

The United States has recognized, to some degree, the urgent need to address Iraq's massive refugee problem. The Commission informed in its letter that it observes with "interest" that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recently established a task force on Iraqi refugees and that the U.S. has agreed to accept up to 7,000 displaced Iraqis this year. Furthermore, the U.S. plans to increase aid to refugees living Iraq's neighboring countries.

Currently, there is an estimated population of about 200,000 expatriate Iraqi Christians living in the United States.

Besides granting asylum for Iraq's religious minorities, others call for the formation of an autonomous state for Iraq's Christian population in the northern Nineveh Plain -- the ancestral homeland of Iraq's Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians - where Christians can live and work without persecution.

The Nineveh proposal is supported by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Christian Solidarity Worldwide among others.

"In today's Iraq, all we have is hope," said Pascale Warda, former Iraqi minister and Assyrian Christian, during a press conference last October.

"For the Assyrian Christians, this hope is rapidly dying. The targeting of our people is something that the world cannot ignore and the governments of the world cannot deny."

The United Nations estimates that as many as 2.7 million Iraqis could flee the country by the end of 2007 if actions are not taken to curb the exodus.

Assyrian International News Agency

By Michelle Vu
Christian Post

© 2011, Assyrian International News Agency. All Rights Reserved. [Terms of Use.](#)