Syndicated News

**Christians in Syria Being Targeted for Kidnapping By Islamic Extremists**

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In a poor gypsy neighborhood of Istanbul, a Syrian Orthodox refugee from Syria says he worked as a dentist in Aleppo as long as he could after fighting broke out in 2011; he finally fled when lack of food, electricity, water, and constant fear of sniper-fire and kidnapping of Christians made life too dangerous.

"Some people would come to my dental office and threaten me with kidnapping," he says. "I finally had to close my practice."

Living in an unheated house and keeping their voices down for fear of attracting police attention, 20 Syrian Orthodox Christians bundle up in winter jackets, drink Turkish coffee, and discuss the dangers of fleeing war-torn Syria and illegally crossing the border into Turkey. The middle-aged dentist, identified only as Ilyas, says in fluent English that friends and relatives were kidnapped by criminal groups operating freely due to the removal of central government control.

The refugee says he paid $6,000 to a smuggler to help him leave and crossed the border while under gunfire from an unknown group. He cannot get legal employment here but works occasionally translating Arabic to Turkish.

Another refugee from northern Syria, identified only as 35-year-old Ibrahim, fled when his aunt was kidnapped by a local criminal group. He said criminal group members were colluding with foreign Muslim extremists who have been flooding into the country to fight President Bashar al-Assad and set up an Islamic state. His aunt was eventually ransomed for $6,000.

Having crossed into Turkey after paying bribes at the border, Ibrahim worries about his future since Syria is no longer safe for Christians, while local charity groups in Turkey have ignored Syrian Orthodox refugees, he said.

"How can we stay in Turkey?" he said. "Nobody gives me a job because they don't like Arabs, and it would be worse if they knew I were a Christian. Even charity organizations in Turkey don't assist me when they find out I am a Christian."

These refugees are among the thousands of Syrian Orthodox fleeing to nearby Middle East countries and Europe.

Those that flee to Europe face dangers by entrusting themselves to smugglers, who have created a multimillion dollar human trafficking business in the fallout of the war. Christians who stay in Syria risk attacks and executions by extremists. Either way, church leaders and activists fear Syria will soon lose its Christian population.

"There is a silent exodus of Christians from Syria," Nuri Kino, a Swedish journalist of Assyrian background, told Morning Star News. "Unfortunately there are signs that what happened in Iraq is happening here – there are kidnappings, rapes, and YouTube videos put up of people being forcibly converted to Islam."

Before the war, 1.4 million Christians lived in Syria, or 6.3 percent of the population of the Muslim-majority nation, according to Operation World. It is unclear how many remain now.

"It's hell out there in Syria," Kino said. "The Christians have a lack of faith and hope and are massively fleeing the country. They don't believe someone is speaking out for them."

Christians in Syria dwell among many other ethnic and religious groups, including Arabs, Kurds, Alawites and Druze. Assyrians are the largest Christian ethnic group. They speak Syriac, a Semitic dialect similar to the spoken language of Jesus, and have been established in the country since Christianity's beginning.

Christians have been vulnerable since the beginning of the civil war that has left 60,000 dead. Unlike ethnic groups, they do not have armed militias to protect themselves and are scattered across the country. As a result, kidnappings of Christians have accelerated due to the perception that they are wealthy and lack armed security.

In the city of Hassaké, 50 Christians were kidnapped last month. Most recently, a Christian pharmacist was kidnapped earlier this month and held for a ransom of approximately 11,000 euros.

Many of those kidnapped are doctors, lawyers and other professionals, but now the poor are beginning to be kidnapped, Syrian Catholic Archbishop of Hassaké-Nisibi Jacques Behnan Hindo told Fides News Agency.

In the wake of such dangers, an intricate human smuggling ring has sprung up to profit off Assyrians fleeing inter-ethnic violence. Kino, who conducted interviews with more than 100 Assyrian refugees, released a report in early February entitled "Between the Barbed Wire" that describes the hardships refugees face and the atrocities Christians encounter in Syria.

In one case, smugglers packed a young man named Jacob into a shipping container with 70 other refugees for hours. They traveled four days to Italy in a tiny boat's cargo hold and were forced to swim for shore a mile off.

Despite paying at least $17,000 to the smugglers, the refugees were forced at gunpoint to hike through miles of forest, squeeze into small spaces with little air, and go for days without food or water. Thirty of the 70 drowned since they could not swim after being stranded in a boat in the middle of a river.
Most Syrian Christian refugees attempt to reach Sweden, where a large Assyrian community has been established and many have family members. Approximately 30 Assyrians a week come to the Swedish town of Södertälje, 30 kilometers (19 miles) south of Stockholm, and Arabic and Syriac have supplanted Swedish as the lingua franca.

Those that do survive the trip and reach Sweden face a life of menial work as laborers even if they come from an educated background, Kino said.

“I know of [an Assyrian] doctor in Sweden who is seeking a job as a cleaner in an elderly care [center] while learning Swedish,” he said. “He doesn’t want to do this, but he has to [in order] to provide for his children and give them a safe future.”

Christian aid groups and monasteries in nearby countries are natural places for Syria’s Christians to seek refuge. Church leaders in Lebanon and Turkey are overwhelmed with the numbers arriving every day.

In Turkey’s southeastern city of Mardin, the Syrian Orthodox Deyrülzafaran Monastery has hosted hundreds of transient immigrants who avoid refugee camps in Turkey for fear of harsh treatment by Syrian Muslims. A refugee in Istanbul who requested anonymity told Morning Star News that he fled the Syrian army — and bypassed the refugee camps — in fear that he would be drafted into fighting for the rebel forces.

His aunt, he said, stayed in such a refugee camp and hid her Christian identity. An imam admonished her to return to Syria and commit jihad (Muslim holy war) against state forces, he said.

Rebels -- Worst Option for Christians

Human rights groups have condemned the attacks against Christians and others as war crimes. Human Rights Watch (HRW) said assailants “deliberately destroyed religious sites” in moves of “unjustified attacks against minority places of worship” after areas had already come under opposition control.

According to an HRW reported released on Jan. 23, opposition gunmen raided churches after taking control of the Christian villages of Jdeideh and Ghasaniyeh in December. They broke into the churches, fired shots inside, stole numerous items and looted nearby houses.

Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at HRW, said in the report that such attacks are fueling sectarian fears and could drive Christians away from the country. Attacks on religious buildings not used for military purposes are war crimes.

“The opposition in Syria should back up its claims that it will uphold minority rights by protecting places of worship, and more generally ensuring that gunmen acting in its name respect civilians and civilian properties,” she said in the report.

Christians fear the opposition National Coalition more than Assad’s government. The worst prospect for them would be the rebels taking power, because the main fighting force is Jahdat al-Nusra, an extremist group with an ideology similar to that of al-Qaeda.

The civil war evolved out of the 2011 Arab Spring protests against the Syrian Ba’ath Party and decades-long rule of Assad’s family. After troops fired on protesters, these slowly changed into an armed opposition.

The Assad family is Alawite, a Shi’ite Islam sect that makes up only 12 percent of the population. They have marginalized Sunni Muslims, which make up three-fourths of the population, leading to sectarian resentment. Many analysts worry that such pent-up tensions will lead to a long, bloody insurgency similar to the Iraq War.

Overwhelming Influx

From such violence the refugees flee, with some ending up stranded in Turkey when smugglers lie to them about their final destination. Yakup Atug, director of the Syriac Help Foundation in Turkey, recalls assisting 30 refugees who were abandoned by smugglers in Turkey’s port city of Çanakkale.

The smugglers had told them they were in Greece.

“They were left in a forest in the rain with no money,” Atug said. “When the police came, they said, ‘We are Palestinians,’ and were sent to Istanbul to be processed through customs. They would have been deported if it were known they were Syrians.”

The smugglers had collected 1,000 euros each from the refugees, who wanted to reach Greece, as entering would facilitate access to the rest of the European Union. They were promised a German passport upon arrival. Instead, the refugees were abandoned in the port city, told it was Greece, and stayed in a rainstorm all night until the threat of severe illness forced them to seek out police.

Smugglers are notorious for cheating refugees of all backgrounds and did not target the Assyrians because of their Christian faith, Atug said.

“If they were Palestinian, they would have done the same,” he said. “They are like the mafia. They will take your old passport and promise to exchange it for a [European] one, only to copy down your address, come to your house armed, and rob everything.”

In Lebanon, church leaders are overwhelmed with the influx of Syrians. St. Gabriel’s Monastery in Ajaltoun, 20 kilometers (12 miles) north of Beirut, opened up its 75 unheated rooms to 100 refugees. School buildings and other structures are converted into temporary shelters.

Christian leaders hope that the refugees will eventually return to their homeland, but many believe it does not appear likely in the near future.

Another Arab country is losing its Christian Assyrian minority, said Archdeacon Emanuel Youkhana of the Assyrian Church of the East in an interview with Nina Shea, director of the Hudson Institute’s Center for Religious Freedom.

“When it happened in Iraq, nobody believed Syria’s turn would come,” Youkhana told Shea. “Behind the daily reporting about bombs there is an ethno-religious cleansing taking place, and soon Syria can be emptied of its Christians.”
