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Assyrian Woman Murdered in Northern Iraq

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(AINA) **Attacks against Assyrians in the northern Iraq "Safe Haven" have continued despite efforts in Washington to forge a democratic and pluralistic Iraqi opposition to the central government in Baghdad.** Earlier this month, the body of Ms. Helena Aloun Sawa, an Assyrian woman, was found by a shepherd partially buried in a shallow grave in Dohuk province near Dohuk dam.

Ms. Sawa was a twenty-one year old Assyrian from the village of Bash in the Nerwa o Rakan region of Dohuk province. Ms. Sawa was the daughter of Mr. Aloun Sawa, an Assyrian member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Mr. Sawa had been killed in 1991 by Iraqi government forces while fighting for Mahsoud Barzani's KDP during the uprising against the Baghdad regime following the Gulf War. Mr. Sawa was formally recognized by the KDP as a martyr and, as is customary for fallen fighters of the KDP, the party had promised a pension to the Sawa family in recognition of the sacrifice made by Mr. Sawa. After only two monthly stipends, however, the pension was inexplicably denied to the Sawa family while other Kurdish families continued to receive their pensions.

When the Sawa family appealed to the KDP for reinstatement of the pension, the KDP instead suggested that the Sawa's turn over their young daughter Helena to work as a housekeeper for a senior KDP leader in order to continue the monthly payments. Thus, out of desperation the Sawa's were obliged to ask their daughter to work for a pension that other Kurdish families were provided outright. Consequently, Ms. Sawa came to work in the home of Mr. Azet Al Din Al Barwari, a higher echelon KDP operative and a leading member of the political bureau of the KDP. Ms. Sawa lived and worked in the Al Barwari home and was allowed to return to her family's home only once monthly.

Most recently, Ms. Sawa was expected home for her monthly furlough from work on May 5, 1999. When she did not arrive at her family home, the concerned Sawa family inquired regarding Helena's whereabouts. The Sawa family had already been deeply troubled about Helena's well being since she had appeared agitated and distraught on her previous visits home. Mr. Al Barwari and the KDP denied any knowledge about Ms. Sawa's whereabouts since she was alleged by the Kurds to have left the Al Barwari home on May 3. The KDP offered no assistance in searching for Ms. Sawa. Mr. Al Barwari has used his authority within the KDP to intimidate the Sawa family into not pursuing an investigation of the crime. Once again, the KDP's reluctance to launch an investigation and Mr. Al Barwari's intimidation has led many Assyrians to suspect KDP and Al Barwari complicity in the murder of Ms. Sawa.

Helena Sawa, 21 year old Assyrian woman recently murdered in Northern Iraq



More than four weeks after her disappearance, Ms. Sawa's shallow grave was discovered by a shepherd tending his flock. The decomposed body was partially exposed and appeared to have been partially eaten by scavenging wild animals. The Sawa family was brought to the burial site in order to provide a positive identification of the remains of the body. Following identification, the body was exhumed and taken to a Dohuk hospital for examination. Because of the mysterious circumstances of Ms. Sawa's murder and the family's belief that she may have been raped, an autopsy was requested. However, because of Kurdish intimidation, the final report has been delayed and is not expected to be scientifically objective or valid.

The Helena Sawa tragedy resembles a well-established pattern of Kurdish authority complicity in attacks against Assyrians in the northern Iraqi provinces. Most Assyrians in Iraq are skeptical that the Kurdish authorities will ever investigate, capture or let alone punish these Kurdish assailants on behalf of their Assyrian victims especially if the assailant is politically connected. However, it is hoped that with the West's recent interest in safeguarding minority human rights, these ongoing attacks against the Assyrian Christians in Iraq will prompt investigations by international organizations and governments. Kurdish leaders such as Mr. Al Barwari who is believed to hold a Swedish passport may be vulnerable to investigation if he ever leaves northern Iraq or when law and order return to Iraq itself.

The tragedy of the Sawa family underscores the dire situation of Assyrians living in Iraq. Whether they reside under Kurdish occupation or within government controlled areas, Assyrians often find themselves the targets of persecution and attacks. Although Mr. Sawa felt obligated to sacrifice his life fighting against Iraqi government oppression on behalf of the KDP, his daughter fared no better living within the United Nations administered "Safe Haven" in a territory controlled by the same KDP. Nor have dozens of other Assyrians such as Francis Shabo- an Assyrian member of the parliament of northern Iraq who Amnesty International said was killed by KDP operatives- fared any better.

The murder of Helena Sawa and the scores of other attacks against Assyrians including rapes, abductions of young girls, murders, attacks on Churches and clergy, cultural and linguistic persecution, and land expropriations by Kurds in the past several years have had the cumulative effect of terrorizing the indigenous Assyrian community in northern Iraq. The premeditated and well established pattern of directing attacks against Assyrians and then steadfastly denying justice to the victims by Kurdish leaders has led to the gradual exodus of Assyrians from their ancestral homes. Such acts reinforce the conviction amongst many Assyrians that the "Safe Haven" designed to protect people from the ravages of the central government has in fact provided the Kurds license to victimize the Assyrians in northern Iraq. Such acts also have the effect of galvanizing the Assyrian community in the Diaspora to seek international recognition of a safe haven for Assyrians as a necessity for Assyrian survival in Iraq. A territorially delineated Assyrian safe haven within predominantly Assyrian areas would allow the recognition and protection of Assyrians, their lands, schools, and churches. Perhaps within an Assyrian safe haven, an Assyrian family like the Sawa's could feel secure enough to continue to live in a land inhabited by their ancestors for several millennia.