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The end of Christianity in the Middle East?

The brutal bombing of a church in Baghdad may be the final straw for this 2,000 year old minority community

By Eden Naby, Jamsheed K. Choksy

Foreign Policy (03.11.2010) / HRWF Int. (04.11.2010) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Screaming "kill, kill, kill," suicide bombers belonging to the Islamic State of Iraq, a militant organization connected to al Qaeda in Iraq, stormed a Chaldean church in Baghdad on Sunday. A spokesman for the group subsequently claimed they did so "to light the fuse of a campaign against Iraqi Christians." The assailants' more immediate grievance seems related to a demand that two Muslim women, allegedly held against their will in Egyptian Coptic monasteries, be released. When Iraqi government forces attempted to free approximately 120 parishioners who had been taken hostage, the terrorists -- who had already shot dead some of the churchgoers -- detonated their suicide vests and grenades, slaughtering at least half the congregation.

But the massacre in Baghdad is only the most spectacular example of mounting discrimination and persecution of the native Christian communities of Iraq and Iran, which are now in the middle of a massive exodus unprecedented in modern times as they confront a rising tide of Islamic militancy and religious chauvinism sweeping the region.

Christians are the largest non-Muslim religious minority in both Iraq and Iran, with roots in the Middle East that date back to the earliest days of the faith. Some follow the Apostolic Orthodox Armenian Church. Others subscribe to the 2,000-year-old Syriac tradition represented mainly by the Chaldean Catholic Church in Iraq and by Aramaic speakers widely known as Assyrians in both Iraq and Iran.

Iraqi and Iranian Muslim leaders claim that religious minorities in their countries are protected. In September, former Iranian president Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani reassured the patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East that religious minorities are respected and safeguarded in Iran. Yet members of Iran's Christian denominations, like

their Jewish, Zoroastrian, Mandean, and Baha'i counterparts, don't feel safe. A member of the National Council of Churches in Iran, Firouz Khandjani, lamented in August, "We are facing the worst persecution" in many decades, including loss of employment, homes, liberties, and lives, he said, "We fear losing everything."

In Iraq, Chaldean and Assyrian Christian communities have witnessed increasing violence by militant Muslims against their neighborhoods, children, and religious sites since the U.S. invasion. Even pastors are not safe -- two died in the recent Baghdad bombing; many have been killed by Sunni and Shiite Iraqis since 2003. In Iran, other clergymen, including members of the Armenian, Protestant, and Catholic churches, have been arrested, kidnapped, imprisoned, tortured, or even summarily executed, over the past three decades.

"Many Christians from Mosul have been systematically targeted and are no longer safe there," said Laurens Jolles, a UNHCR representative, in 2008, after Chaldean women were raped while their men, including Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho, were tortured and killed in warnings to Christians to abandon their homes and livelihoods. In Iran, Christian clerics have been targeted -- Tateos Mikaelian, senior pastor of St. John's Armenian Evangelical Church in Tehran was assassinated in 1994, as was Bishop Haik Hovsepian Mehr, who headed the evangelical Assemblies of God Church.

Why Christians? Of the many justifications offered by al Qaeda and other fanatical groups in Iraq, and by hard-line mullahs in Iran, one is repeated most often: These indigenous Christians are surrogates for Western "crusaders." As early as 1970, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa accusing Christians in Iran of "working with American imperialists and oppressive rulers to distort the truths of Islam, lead Muslims astray, and convert our children." Fearing a backlash against their institutions and lives, Christians have often made efforts to prove their loyalty, as when Iranian Assyrians wrote to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in September denouncing American Christians who wished to burn Qurans as "enemies of God."

But the roots of Christian decline in the Middle East actually date back centuries. In Iran, intolerance toward all non-Muslim minorities took a sharply negative turn from the 16th century onward with the forced Shiification of Iran by the Safavid dynasty. The early 20th century saw pogroms against Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek Christians in the Ottoman Empire and northwestern Iran. Under the Pahlavi shahs, Assyrians, Armenians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Baha'is regained some of their rights and came to represent the modernizing elements of 20th century society. But the Islamic Revolution of 1979 undercut all those advances. Prejudice and oppression now occurs with impunity.

The numbers speak for themselves: The population of non-Muslims in Iran has dropped by two-thirds or more since 1979. From Iran, these groups flee to Turkey and India -- often at risk to life and limb through the violence-ridden border regions of Iraq and Pakistan. The number of Assyrian Christians in Iran has dwindled from about 100,000 in the mid-1970s to approximately 15,000 today, even as the overall population of the country has swelled from 38 million to 72 million people over the same period. In Iraq, Christians are fleeing in droves. U.N. statistics indicate that 15 percent of all Iraqi refugees in Syria are of Christian background, although they represented only 3 percent of the population when U.S. troops entered in 2003. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that between 300,000 to 400,000 Christians have been forced out of Iraq since 2003. And Christians have left because the message from Sunni militants and Shiite ayatollahs is crystal clear: You have no future here.

There is now an alarming possibility that there will be no significant Christian communities in Iraq or Iran by century's end. Christian schools, communal halls, historical sites, and churches are being appropriated by national and provincial governments, government-sponsored Muslim organizations, and radical Islamist groups.

Economic and personal incentives are offered to those who adopt Islam. Last month, the Vatican convened a major summit to find ways of mitigating this crisis, noting that "Christians deserve to be recognized for their invaluable contributions ... their human rights should always be respected, including freedom of worship and freedom of religion." There is a faint glimmer of hope. On Aug. 5, the U.S. Senate adopted Resolution 322 expressing concern for religious minorities in Iraq. The quick, though unsuccessful, attempt by the Iraqi government this weekend to rescue the Christian hostages appears to have been in response to such American pressure -- no official Iraqi interventions had occurred in previous attacks.

In Iran, however, the persecution of Christians continues unabated. Two Protestant pastors, arrested in post-presidential election crackdowns, face the death penalty. An Assyrian pastor was arrested and tortured in February 2010 and faces trial too.

The Senate resolution noted that "threats against the smallest religious minorities ... jeopardize ... a diverse, pluralistic, and free society," words applicable in full measure to Iran as well. Will Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government heed this call? It's doubtful. But one thing's for certain: If the world doesn't champion religious freedom openly and vigorously, he won't have to.

25 Catholic Assyrians killed as Baghdad church hostage drama ends in bloodbath

By Jim Muir

Assyrian International News Agency / BBC (01.11.2010) / HRWF Int. (04.11.2010) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - At least 37 people have been killed after Iraqi security forces stormed a Catholic church in central Baghdad to free dozens of hostages being held by gunmen there, security sources say. Twenty-five hostages were among the dead, along with seven members of the Iraqi security forces and at least five of the attackers, they told the BBC.

About 100 people had been inside Our Lady of Salvation for an evening Mass. The gunmen had reportedly demanded the release of jailed al-Qaeda militants. The local TV station, al-Baghdadiya, said it had received a phone call from someone claiming to be one of the attackers, who said they were from the Islamic State of Iraq, a Sunni militant umbrella group to which al-Qaeda in Iraq belongs. Reports said the attackers were not Iraqis, but foreign Arabs. The raid came two days after a suicide attack on a cafe in Diyala province left 21 people dead.

'Priest killed'

Residents of Baghdad's Karada district, where the attack took place, first heard a loud explosion at about 1700 (1400 GMT), followed by gunfire. Police said a group of armed men began by attacking the Iraq Stock Exchange building, and then took over the Catholic church just across the road, clashing with guards and killing some of them. Security forces later surrounded the church and sealed off the area, with helicopters hovering overhead. Then they stormed the building. Witnesses nearby said they then heard two explosions from inside the church and more shooting. One eyewitness, who was inside the church, was quoted by the AFP news agency as saying that the gunmen "came into the prayer hall and immediately killed the priest". The witness, who declined to give his name, said the people in the church had huddled into the main prayer hall when the gunbattles began with the security forces. The gunmen reportedly threw grenades and blew their suicide vests. There were no negotiations with the gunmen before the security forces stormed the church, reports suggest. Witnesses also say they

saw US troops on the ground and US military helicopters hovering above the scene, but the extent of their involvement is not yet clear. "The operation has finished and we released all the hostages," said the commander of police in south-eastern Baghdad, Brig Gen Ali Ibrahim. The BBC's Jim Muir in Baghdad says there are different figures from different sources for the number of hostages and attackers involved, and how many of each were killed or captured. Earlier reports said that two security guards at the stock exchange had been killed before the attackers occupied the church.

Many churches have been bombed in recent years - including Our Lady of Salvation in August 2004 - and priests kidnapped and killed, but there has never been a prolonged hostage situation like this before, our correspondent says. There are about 1.5 million Christians from ancient denominations in Iraq. Iraqi Christians have been leaving the country in droves since the US-led invasion in 2003.

Religious intolerance part of the lesson plan in Iraqi schools

Abeer Mohammed

The Institute for War & Peace Reporting (17.09.2010) / HRWF Int. (27.09.2010) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - Zuhair Jerjis and Ahmed Mohammed are both 10. They attend the same Baghdad school and often ride home together. After school, the two get together and play video games.

But Ahmed is worried. He wonders if some day, he will have to murder his best friend.

The boys go to the same school and share a ride home to the same district of Baghdad, but their parents do not share the same faith.

Zuhair's family is Christian, and Ahmed's is Muslim. Recent religious lessons at school have left Ahmed questioning what end awaits his friendship.

"Our teacher tells us it is forbidden in Islam to make friends with unbelievers," he said. "When I study that we have to fight the unbelievers in the name of jihad, I think, 'Will I kill Zuhair one day?'"

Ahmed's family is Muslim; Zuhair's is Christian. And it turns out that in Iraq's schools today, religious tolerance is not part of the curriculum.

Religious education is a regular feature of public schools in Iraq. Because Zuhair is a Christian, he is not required to attend religious classes. But because the vast majority of his classmates are Muslims, Zuhair said he often feels alone and isolated.

"When all of my friends are in the class, I have to stand outside," he said.

As students prepare to return to classes this fall, there is growing criticism of the recently introduced curriculum, which critics say fails to tackle the causes of religious and sectarian hatred that have fueled the violence of the last six years. Worse still, they accuse it of laying the foundations for future strife.

The main concerns about the school program are that it favors the Shia interpretation of Islam. In addition, many are concerned that some teachers focus on subjects not directly addressed in the curriculum, such as the treatment of non-Muslims and jihad, or holy war.

Before the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, religious education reflected the beliefs of the minority Sunni population, which makes up roughly one-quarter of the current population.

The current curriculum places more emphasis on Shia Islam, a sect followed by the majority of Iraq's Arabs and by its most powerful politicians, including Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Muhsin al-Freji, an adviser to the education minister, insists that the curriculum — first introduced in 2006 — has attempted to represent all Iraqis.

"We did our best to update the curriculum so it expressed the views of all Iraqis," he said. "A few changes were made, and more are on the way." But Sunni Arab politicians have been vocal in their criticism of the changes.

Alaa Makki, a Sunni member of parliament and head of a parliamentary committee on education, said the new curriculum was unbalanced.

"The current changes have a huge sectarian impact," he said. "The updating process should focus on the shared aspects (of Islam), not on a specific sect." Some of the areas of dispute are subtle and reflect the centuries-old schism within Islam.

For example, Iraq's former Sunni-accented textbooks followed all mentions of the Prophet with a traditional Sunni blessing, "Peace be upon him." In the new textbooks, the blessing is a typical Shia one, "Peace be upon him and his family." In addition, anecdotal evidence from schools suggests many teachers offer their own views on such topics as the treatment of non-Muslims or the obligation to wage jihad.

Sanaa Muhsin, an Islamic studies teacher in Baghdad's Shaab district, said she regularly instructs her students that "each Muslim had a duty to carry out jihad — namely to fight unbelievers." She identified unbelievers as those who did not follow Allah or the Prophet Mohammed.

Some students appear to be learning the lessons well.

Sajjad Kiayyad, 7, of Baghdad, said he plans to become a holy warrior when he grows up. "I will fight the Americans because they are Jewish and unbelievers," he said. "I will be victorious, or I will be a martyr in heaven."

Maryam Ali, 9, also of Baghdad, said she is carrying out her own jihad by calling on "unveiled female friends to cover their heads."

Freji, the education ministry adviser, insisted that teachers had been instructed to steer clear of issues that aroused conflict. The new curriculum, he said, focused on the fraternal aspects of Islam. "The Islamic religion, and therefore the Islamic curriculum, emphasizes forgiveness and mercy."

Another Christian killed in Mosul

Layla Yousif Rahema

AsiaNews (06.07.2010) / HRWF Int. (07.07.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The agony continues for the Christian community of Mosul, the most dangerous city in Iraq. Yesterday July 5, in a targeted attack yet another Christian was killed. 54 year old Syrian Orthodox, Behnam Sabti worked as a nurse at the Jumhuriya state hospital of Mosul. A

bomb fixed under his car exploded while the man was driving, killing him instantly. Local sources, anonymous for security reasons, tell AsiaNews, they are convinced that the motive of the murder was the man's "religious identity". Married with three children, he will be buried in Bashiqa Kemal, his native village in the north.

According to the latest data, released in late June by the Iraqi ministries for Defence, Health and the Interior, violence has declined on a national scale. Nevertheless, people are still despondent and living in fear. The number of Iraqis killed violently, in June, fell to 284 compared with 437 the same month in 2009.

If Iraq is experiencing a political stalemate due to protracted negotiations on forming a new government after March 7 elections, Mosul faces "a real security vacuum", sources tell AsiaNews. In what is now the "Al Qaeda stronghold in Mesopotamia", two types of violence take place, terrorism directed against the locals - mostly Shia - and minorities, and jihadist violence targeting American troops and their allies of the Iraqi security forces.

The streets of Mosul are patrolled by the U.S. military, about 18 Iraqi army battalions are deployed throughout the city, along with hundreds of police and checkpoints. Nevertheless, the situation remains highly uncertain, as revealed by the same American officials. And the problems "will increase when the U.S. completes the withdrawal," says Didar Abdulla al-Zibari, a member of the local provincial council.

Car bomb targets Christian student's bus near Mosul

AsiaNews (03.05.2010) / HRWF Int. (06.05.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Another targeted attack on the Christian minority. Iraqi police said the two attacks took place yesterday in the north, where the community decimated by years of religious persecution now live en masse. The attackers used a car bomb and improvised explosive device, detonated by the passage of buses carrying students residing in the town of Hamdaniya, 40 km east of Mosul. The toll is of 100 wounded and one person dead, a Christian, owner of a shop located near the site of the explosions.

The students, all Christians, "we were traveling by bus from the University of Mosul, despite constant threats under which they live," said Nissan Karoumi, Mayor of Hamdaniya. For over five years the University of Mosul has been in the sights of Islamic extremist groups fighting for the conversion of young students. Often leaflets circulate in the university that promise to "kill every Iraqi woman who does not wear the veil" and anyone wearing "Western" clothes.

Mosul itself has long been the most dangerous area of Iraq for the Christian minority. The Diaspora increases daily and many now argue that the city may soon become completely Muslim, if authorities do not take serious measures to curb the violence and punish those responsible for attacks that mostly remain unknown.

The political and sectarian tension is rising and the parliamentary elections of 7 March, have not yet shown a real winner. The country is in the grips of a power vacuum, while the various factions fight for a place in the new government, under pressure from rival outside powers like Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Official: 122 Iraqi Christian families return to Mosul

EarthTimes (11.03.2010) / HRWF Int. (12.03.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Some 122 Christian families have returned to the troubled northern Iraqi city of Mosul since the March 7 parliamentary elections, a local official said Thursday. Representatives of the city's Christian population had earlier told the German Press Agency dpa that some 250 Christian families had fled following a string of deadly attacks targeting the community ahead of the polls.

Local government official Ali Mahmoud told reporters that in the days since the vote, some 122 families had returned home after fleeing to predominantly Christian towns to the east of the city.

"Residents of the city received them in joy and happiness," he said, "which shows the strength of the bonds between the people of Nineveh province, regardless of their sect."

Mosul and the surrounding Nineveh province are among the most ethnically and religiously diverse areas in Iraq, and among the most dangerous. Five polling stations were closed during Sunday's vote after mortar rounds injured at least six monitors at one station.

Violence escalates in Mosul, Iraq ahead of elections

Christians targeted as political tension builds in weeks leading to parliamentary polls

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct (04.03.2010) / HRWF Int. (05.03.2010) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Political tensions ahead of parliamentary elections in Iraq on Sunday (March 7) have left at least eight Chaldean Christians dead in the last three weeks and hundreds of families fleeing Mosul.

"The concern of Christians in Mosul is growing in the face of what is happening in the city," said Chaldean Archbishop of Kirkuk Louis Sako. "The tension and struggle between political forces is creating an atmosphere of chaos and congestion. Christians are victims of political tension between political groups, but maybe also by fundamentalist sectarian cleansing."

On Feb. 23 the killing of Eshoee Marokee, a Christian, and his two sons in their home in front of other family members sent shock waves across the Christian community. The murder took place amid a string of murders that triggered the mass exodus of families to the surrounding towns and provinces.

"It is not the first time Christians are attacked or killed," said the archbishop of the Syrian Catholic Church in Mosul, Georges Casmoussa. "The new [element] in this question is to be killed in their own homes."

The capital of Nineveh Province some 400 kilometers (250 miles) northwest of Baghdad, Mosul has been known as the most dangerous city for Christians. At least 275 Assyrian Christians have been murdered by Islamic insurgents since 2003, according to a report prepared by the International Committee for The Rights of Indigenous Mesopotamians.

While in 2009 the organization listed 16 deaths, since January there have been at least 13 murders, eight of which took place the second half of February.

The movement of internally displaced persons to surrounding areas started in mid-February and tripled between Feb. 24 and Feb. 27 to about 683 families, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Although the rate of displacement into areas around Mosul has slowed, the report estimates that 720 families had fled the city as of March 1. This represents about 4,320 people.

Christian students effected

The murders have not only driven families away from the cities but have also kept students away from university. Three of the Christians killed in February were university students. As a result, around 2,000 Christian students are staying away from their classes until the tension in Mosul eases.

"We believe that the attack against these students was somehow related to the political situation in Mosul," said General Secretary of the Chaldo-Assyrian Student and Youth Union Kaldo Oghanna. "This has affected our people in Mosul badly, and they have left the university."

Oghanna said that the union has proposed that the Ministry of Education open a new university in a safer area of the Nineveh plains for the nearly 3,000 Christian undergraduate students and 250 graduate students studying in Mosul. He also said that they have appealed to the university's administration to make necessary exceptions for the Christian students who have not attended classes in the last few weeks.

Although some local Christian leaders say they expect the tension to ease after Sunday, security may not improve as the Christian community is caught in political tensions between Arabs and Kurds vying for control of the province. Archbishop Casmoussa said regardless of who is behind the murders, the Christian community demands justice.

"We urge the Central and Regional Government to pursue the murders and their masters and judge them according to Iraqi laws, even if they are supported by religious or political parties," Casmoussa said. "Enough is enough. Are we to pay the price of political struggles or ambitions?"

Sako said that in other cities security has improved, and that Christians are eager to cast their votes.

The election on March 7 will decide the 325 members of the Council of Representatives of Iraq, who will then elect the prime minister and president of Iraq. Of these seats, five are reserved for the nation's Christian minority, estimated at around 600,000. Most of them live in the Nineveh plain.

At the beginning of the Iraq war, there were about 1.2 million Christians living in Iraq. Iraq's population is roughly 30 million.

Protect Christians from violence

HRW (24.02.2010) / HRWF Int. (25.02.2010) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Iraq's government should bolster security to protect the lives of Christians in Mosul, Human Rights Watch said today. Since February 14, 2010, five Christians have been killed in Mosul in separate attacks that appear to be politically motivated, given the country's looming national election.

Human Rights Watch called on the government to take immediate measures, such as an increased security presence in Chaldo-Assyrian neighborhoods before and during the

elections, to help prevent a repeat of a campaign of violence that devastated the community in Mosul in late 2008.

"Iraq's authorities need to act now to stop this campaign of violence against Christians from spreading again," said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "In particular, the government needs to see that those responsible for these murders are swiftly arrested and prosecuted to protect Mosul's Christians from further violence."

According to information obtained by Human Rights Watch, on February 16, assailants impersonating secret police approached Zaya Toma and his cousin, Ramsin Shmael, while they waited at a bus stop in Mosul's al-Tahrir district on their way to the university they attend. Speaking in Arabic, the assailants asked Toma, a 22-year-old engineering student, and Shmael, a 21-year-old pharmacy student, for their identity cards. Although identity cards in Iraq do not indicate religion or ethnicity, assailants have often used the victim's name as a marker of his or her religious or ethnic affiliation.

After Toma produced his card, one of the assailants shot him point-blank in the head, killing him instantly. Ramsin tried to run but was shot twice; one bullet shattered his teeth. The assailants fled, apparently assuming they had killed both students, although Shmael survived. Family members arrived on the scene before the police, to find Toma lying in a pool of blood, his books on one side of his body, his identity card on the other.

The incident has devastated the broader family of Toma and Shmael, who escaped to northern Iraq from Baghdad in the summer of 2007 after receiving threats to kill them unless they converted to Islam. Family members say they want to move again - this time out of Iraq - to join the hundreds of thousands of Chaldo-Assyrians who have fled since 2003.

"By killing Zaya, they have taken everything from us," a family member told Human Rights Watch. "Our only crime is that we are Christian,"

The attack was one of several killings of Christians in Mosul the same week:

- On February 20, the body of Adnan Hanna al-Dahan was found in northern Mosul. The 57-year-old Syrian Orthodox grocer had been kidnapped by unknown assailants from inside his shop a few days earlier.
- On February 17, the bullet-ridden body of Wissam George, a 20-year-old Assyrian studying to be a teacher, was found after he disappeared that morning on his way to school.
- On February 15, gunmen stormed a grocery store and killed Fatukhi Munir, its owner.
- On February 14, Rayan Salem Elias, a Chaldean man, was shot dead outside his home.

While the identities of the perpetrators remain unknown, the spike in attacks against Christians comes only days ahead of Iraq's March 7 parliamentary vote. Families of the victims and community leaders believe the violence is politically motivated and are appealing to the government for protection.

The Chaldean archbishop of Mosul, Emil Shimoun Nona, said the most recent killings could prompt a new wave of refugees fleeing northern Iraq, where Christians live in constant apprehension. Â Since 2003, between 250,000 and 500,000 Christians - or about half the Christian population - have left the country, according to the UN High

Commission for Refugees. In January, Archbishop Nona was installed as successor to Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho, whose body was found in March 2008, ten days after kidnappers seized him as he was leaving the Holy Spirit Church in Mosul.

Human Rights Watch said that the recent attacks recall the campaign of targeted killings against Chaldo-Assyrians in Mosul in late 2008 that the organization documented in a 51-page report, "On Vulnerable Ground: Violence against Minority Communities in Nineveh Province's Disputed Territories," released in November 2009. The orchestrated violence left 40 Chaldo-Assyrians dead and led to a mass exodus of more than 12,000 from their homes in Mosul. Assailants targeted Christians in their homes, in workplaces, and in places of worship.

Those killings began shortly after the Christian community lobbied the Iraqi parliament to pass a law that would set aside a greater number of seats for minorities in the January 2009 provincial elections. The attacks escalated after Christians held demonstrations in Nineveh and Baghdad in response to parliament's decision (later amended) to drop a provision in the provincial elections law ensuring political representation for minorities.

The report also documented intimidation and restrictions on freedom of movement by Kurdish authorities in northern Iraq of other minority groups in Nineveh, including Yazidis and Shabaks, during the 2009 provincial elections.

Human Rights Watch

Five dead, including three Assyrians, in Iraq attacks

AFP (24.02.2010) / HRWF Int. (25.02.2010) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Five people were killed, including three Christian men and a policeman, in the restive northern Iraqi city of Mosul on Tuesday, less than two weeks ahead of a nationwide general election.

In the deadliest attack, a Christian man and his two sons were gunned down in their home, bringing to eight the total number of Christians murdered in the city, 350 kilometres (220 miles) north of Baghdad, in the past 10 days.

"Unknown gunmen entered the house of Aishwa Maroki, who was 59 years old, and killed him and his two sons -- Mokhlas, 31, and Bassim, 25," said police Major Khalaf al-Juburi. All the victims were Syrian Catholic.

Juburi said Maroki's wife and daughter were in the west Mosul house when the shooting happened but were not killed. He added that the gunmen stole the family's gold before escaping.

According to a neighbour the gunmen arrived at the house on three motorcycles.

Local leaders had expressed concern that Christians could be targeted ahead of the March 7 parliamentary election in a country wracked by sectarian violence since the US-led invasion of 2003.

In November, New York-based Human Rights Watch warned that minorities in the oil-rich north including Christians were the collateral victims of a conflict between Arabs and Kurds over who controls Iraq's disputed northern provinces.

Later on Tuesday, policeman Ahmed al-Luhaibi was killed when a magnetic bomb attached to his car exploded at around 6:30 pm (1530 GMT) in south Mosul, a police officer said on condition of anonymity.

In the town of Tal Abta, 35 kilometres (20 miles) west of the city, police also found a bullet-riddled body at around 4:30 pm. A police official said the body, of a man aged between 30 and 35, could not immediately be identified.

While sectarian violence has dropped dramatically across Iraq since its peak from 2005 to 2007, attacks remain common, especially in Baghdad and Mosul.

Mosul: targeted execution of Christians continues in media and government silence

AsiaNews (19.01.2010) / HRWF Int. (20.01.2010) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – The second targeted attack against the Christian community in less than 24 hours, the indifference of the security forces who did not intervene. Yesterday in Mosul, northern Iraq, an unidentified group shot dead 45 year-old businessman Amjad Hamid Abdullahad. Sunday, January 17th, the same day of the inauguration of new local archbishop, a Christian aged 52, married and father of two daughters, was killed. AsiaNews sources in the city explain that "the government blames the attacks on al-Qaeda fundamentalists ", in reality the community is victim of the power struggle between "Arab and Kurd" groups.

At noon yesterday, an armed commando executed Abdullahad Amjad Hamid, a married Syriac Catholic, who owned a small grocery store in the neighbourhood of Alsiddiq, in northern Mosul. The man was killed outside his home in the suburb of Balladiyat, not far from his workplace.

Local witnesses reported that "the murder took place in front of the security forces, who saw all the phases of the attack, but did not intervene." A Catholic in Mosul says that "the tactic is to murder Christians, because the media does not talk about it." A strategy that aims to push Christians towards the plain of Nineveh, "in the silence and indifference of the government and the international community."

A source for AsiaNews in Mosul, adds that "Christians are living in panic and have begun fleeing from the city". He explains that "these are not normal criminals," but behind them are "specific political plans" that the government is not countering. There is no information from Baghdad "about who is behind attacks on churches and Christians," but the source is confident that the central executive, the governorship of Mosul and the Kurdish leadership "are aware" of the plan against the Christian community.

"It is easier to attribute responsibility to Al Qaeda – concludes the source - and the fundamentalist fringe. In reality, Christians are victims of a power struggle between Arabs and Kurds". (DS)
