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Iraq: Survivors describe Mosque massacre

HRW (02.11.2014) - Victims of a massacre in a mosque in Diyala province by Iraqi pro-government militias and security forces recognized the attackers and knew them by name. The Iraqi government should promptly make public any investigation of the attack on the Musab Bin Omair mosque on August 22, 2014, which killed 34 people, and bring those responsible to justice.

According to accounts by five witnesses, including one survivor of the attack, armed men, some wearing civilian clothes and others in police uniforms, attacked the mosque at

midday in the village of Imam Weiss in Hamreen, Diyala province, about 50 kilometers northeast of Baaquba, the provincial capital. The attackers shot to death 32 men, one woman, and one 17-year-old boy, all of whom witnesses said were civilians who were attending Friday prayer when they were killed, with PK-type and AK-47 Russian-made automatic weapons, the witnesses said. All of the witnesses said they recognized the attackers and knew them by name.

"Pro-government militias are becoming emboldened and their crimes more shocking," said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director. "Iraqi authorities and Iraq's allies alike have ignored this horrific attack and then they wonder why the militant group Islamic State has had such appeal among Sunni communities."

Witnesses, all of whom asked Human Rights Watch not to reveal their identities for their protection, said the shooting began at about 12:10 p.m., during the imam's Friday speech. A survivor, who was inside the Sunni mosque, said he saw a man enter wearing the dark green T-shirt, pants, and headband typically worn by militiamen affiliated with Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq, a pro-government militia. He was carrying a PK-type automatic weapon.

"He shouted, 'Do not move. No one leave!'" the witness said. "He aimed his first shot at the sheikh [imam], and then he continued shooting at the rest of us. When I heard the first gunshot I dropped to the ground."

The gunman continued shooting at random, the witness said. "People were on the ground screaming and crying, saying, 'Allahu akbar [God is great], La ilaha illa Allah [there is no God but God].'"

Three of the witnesses entered the mosque after this first attack. They said they saw eight armed men leaving the mosque. When they entered, they saw about 10 people who appeared to be already dead and about 30 more injured. "What I saw was indescribable, inhuman," one said. "Most of the people were injured, not dead, and were crying out for water and for help with their injuries. I saw a man whose left side of his head was completely blown off."

Two witnesses said they had begun carrying the wounded into the garden in front of the mosque when, after about 10 minutes, they heard more shooting as a second group of between 20 and 30 armed men headed toward the mosque. The witnesses fled, leaving the wounded behind. Another witness who was watching from his house about 100 meters away confirmed this account.

All of the witnesses said they then heard screams and more gunshots. The second round of shooting lasted approximately 15 minutes, they said.

The witnesses told Human Rights Watch that all of the 34 dead except one were from the Beni Weiss, a Sunni tribe in Diyala. None of the witnesses knew the reason for the attack, but one said he believed it was in retaliation for an attack with an improvised explosive device earlier that day about 20 kilometers north of Imam Weiss that killed five militiamen. The witnesses all said there were no fighters in or around Imam Weiss at the time of the attack.

The witnesses said there was an army checkpoint about 200 meters from the mosque and a police checkpoint about 150 meters from the mosque, but that no security forces responded to the attack even though the shooting was broadcast over the mosque loudspeaker and could be heard from at least 600 meters away, where one witness heard the shooting from his home.

Two witnesses said they called for army assistance and for an ambulance, but none

arrived until nearly an hour later. At about 1:30 p.m., they said, soldiers from the 5th brigade of the army's 20th division arrived in an army ambulance and a cargo truck, which carried the dead to the hospital morgue in Muqdadiyya, 15 kilometers away.

The survivor said that he was among a half dozen people who survived the shootings. He said his cousin sought treatment at the local hospital but left after doctors warned him that militiamen were heading to the hospital to kill survivors seeking treatment there. Human Rights Watch reviewed the cousin's medical records, dated August 22, which indicated that he required an operation and plastic surgery due to a bullet wound in his right arm that crushed the bone and created an abscess.

The witnesses and three other residents said that sectarian tensions in the town had escalated after fighters of the militant group Islamic State (also known as ISIS) took over the city of Mosul on June 10. While the largely Shia militias were already there, working with the security forces, after June 10, militias took control of the police and army, witnesses and residents said. Imam Weiss has a population of about 500 families, 300 of them Sunni and 200 Shia, the residents said.

On October 22, in response to Human Rights Watch's request for information about the attack, Interior Ministry Spokesman General Saad Maan Ibrahim told Human Rights Watch that the Interior Ministry had formed an "investigation commission" to look at the attack, which determined three suspects had carried out the killings. Maan did not know whether the judiciary had set a date for their hearings.

Maan said the killings were in response to an IED explosion that killed a number of volunteer fighters driving into Imam Weiss early morning on August 22. "We heard that some of their relatives, two or three, went to that mosque carrying AKs and opened fired on the mosque, killing them all, which was a normal, spontaneous reaction of revenge," Maan said. "It was a revenge operation for what they lost." None of the relatives of the victims knew whom the investigative committee had held responsible for the crime, the charges against them or whether there would be a public trial.

The August 22 attack is consistent with a pattern of attacks that Human Rights Watch has documented, including kidnappings and summary executions, by Shia militias Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq, the Badr Brigades, and Kita'ib Hezbollah in Baghdad, Diyala and Babel provinces.

Foreign governments should stop providing Iraq with military support and assistance until the government ensures that such widespread war crimes and crimes against humanity have ended, including ensuring those responsible for such crimes are held accountable, Human Rights Watch said.

The United States has sent Iraq military aid and in August began air strikes against ISIS targets. Militias have taken over at least some of the areas where the US has carried out air strikes, according to accounts from area residents.

In September, a Human Rights Watch researcher saw a convoy of 10 to 12 cars filled with militiamen carrying heavy weapons and new-model M-16s in Baghdad. The militiamen pointed their weapons at traffic to force other cars to the side to let them pass, and drove through a federal police checkpoint without being stopped.

"Iraq's international allies cannot allow the fight against the abusive extremists of ISIS to be carte blanche for the Iraqi government's allies to callously kill civilians who happen to be Sunnis," Stork said.

Why we must intervene to create safe havens in Iraq

Conservative Home (03.09.2014) <http://www.conservativehome.com> - Iraq a country with which Britain went to war and whose modern state Britain helped to create just over a decade ago -- is engulfed in a crisis of historic proportions. The minority peoples of Iraq -- including the ethnically Assyrian Christian population, Shabaks, Turkomen, and Yazidis -- are in the midst of genocide at the hands of ISIS, or the 'Islamic State.' The discourse from British politicians and officials has so far focused on issues of domestic terrorism and humanitarian assistance. These matters are clearly essential. But, as Parliament reconvenes, an erudite, detailed, and creative discussion on what Britain's role should be in restoring Iraq's sovereignty and assisting its most vulnerable citizens must be an urgent priority. Entire peoples face eradication.

In recent memory, the UK government has played a leading role in helping the Kurds of northern Iraq -- who were facing another round of ethnic cleansing from Saddam Hussein in the fallout of the uprising against him -- secure a safe haven in 1991. This endeavour, known as Operation Provide Comfort, has faded in the collective -- even the more specialised -- British memory. Perhaps the operation was too abstruse, and its achievements apparently too subtle.

But eclipsed as it has been by the invasion of 2003, we should remind ourselves that the beneficial impact of the safe haven is still being felt in the region of Iraq controlled by the KRG. A safe corridor and zone of repatriation, established through an operationally coordinated British-led international force, allowed around 450,000 Kurds to securely return to Dohuk and elsewhere within five weeks of their expulsion. It was under the auspices of this safe haven that the Kurdistan Regional Government was then able to establish and develop itself.

The operation should be used as a precedent for the creation of a safe zone on behalf of Assyrians, Yazidis, and other minorities of northern Iraq, with a view to their long-term semi-autonomy within the Iraqi state.

There are several reasons why an operation is more propitious now than in 1991. ISIS has no airpower, rendering the no-fly zone component of the operation needless. The safe zone would not be in conflict with a belligerent state like Saddam's Iraq, but would rather proceed -- as long as certain provisions regarding its long-term territorial and national status were met -- with the support of the current Iraq government. In fact, the Iraqi government approved the creation of a province in Nineveh in January, which was set to establish a basis for the semi-autonomy long advocated by Assyrian leaders.

Though the 2003 invasion is often maligned in Britain because of its lack of international support, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has just recommended the creation of safe zone in Nineveh, and because the operation would not be an act of war or regime change, a range of parties could be called upon to assist the British forces. The forces creating the safe zone would not be staging an incursion into enemy territory, but fashioning a secure territory within an already established, federal democratic state that is in urgent need of buttressing.

The safe zone operation would also address the urgent refugee crisis in Northern Iraq. Following mass expulsions from Mosul, Sinjar, and the Nineveh Province, around 450,000 citizens -- mainly ethnic Assyrians and Yazidis -- have arrived in Kurdish controlled areas. The infrastructural and humanitarian crisis facing these dispossessed families is immense: in short, they have lost everything that constituted their lives. They line roads, parks, and every available public space in the cities of Dohuk and Erbil. They are in desperate need of food, shelter, and medical supplies.

The sooner a return is facilitated, the more aid and infrastructural development can be focused on the rehabilitation and development of the homes, towns, and cities minorities were forced to abandon. This would avoid the creation of ad hoc sites for dispossessed people -- the likes of which have been created in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey to house Syrian refugees whose homes and cities have been completely destroyed -- that have entrenched the dislocation of refugees without providing them with a chance to guide their own futures.

The withdrawal of both the Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi army forces from the north -- which exposed non-Kurdish, non-Arab minority peoples to ethnic cleansing -- is a savage illustration of the urgent need for locally derived security forces with a stake in their communities to defend their own soil. The training and equipping of these forces, as units of the Iraqi army, would be another aim of the safe zone operation. As part of a federal Iraq, the presence of these sanctioned security units would contribute to the state's territorial and national coherence.

However, it would be perilously naïve to believe that these units would be sufficient to prevent further onslaughts from the Islamic State or other extremist factions. Ultimately, there must be an Iraqi army committed to protecting Iraq as a state. The profundity of contemporary fragmentation in Iraq should not be understated, but it is less the result of congenital divisions than of tendencies encouraged by the Iraqi political system and the consequences of the violence within the country over the past decade. The longer divisions are allowed to fester, the grimmer the regional picture will become. Out of the extremity of this crisis must emerge a set of realisations that will cohere the Iraqi leadership and encourage Iraqis to realise and be encouraged to build upon their mutual, collective national interests.

Despite the daunting complexity of the task ahead, Britain must use this period of fragmentation as an opportunity to play a leading role in not only providing protection for minorities in the north but creating a meaningful place for them in their country. It would reverse some of the most harrowing desecrations of human dignity, civilizational heritage, and national integrity of recent decades, and would create a beacon of justice, order and hope in a country and a region on the verge of even greater turmoil.

Mardean Isaac is a British-Assyrian writer and the UK representative of A Demand for Action, a global initiative to protect minorities in Iraq and Syria.

Islamic State fighters kill dozens of Yazidi villagers

The Washington Post (16.08.2014) - Extremist fighters have killed more than 80 men and detained hundreds of women in a Yazidi village, Yazidis and Kurdish officials said Saturday, offering a reminder that the ancient minority sect is still at risk despite President Obama's conclusion that the threat had passed for those stranded on Mount Sinjar.

Islamic State militants drove into the village of Kocho, about 15 miles southwest of the town of Sinjar, on Friday, following a week-long siege in which the al-Qaeda inspired group demanded that residents convert to Islam or face death, said the reports, which could not be independently verified.

The men were rounded up and executed, while the women were taken to an undisclosed location, according to Ziad Sinjar, a pesh merga commander based on the edge of Mount Sinjar, citing the accounts of villagers nearby. Six men were injured but survived, and

managed to escape to a nearby village where they are being sheltered by sympathetic local Sunni Iraqis, he said. One of them told him that 84 Yazidi men were lined up and shot and that more than 300 women were taken away.

Yazidi activists and Kurdish officials said at least 80 men were killed and hundreds of women taken away after the fighters entered the village shortly after 1 pm on Friday.

"The villagers had received local assurances that they were safe," said Hoshiyar Zebari, Iraq's former foreign minister who is now working closely with the Kurdistan Regional Government. "Maybe they killed them in revenge for the setbacks they have suffered from the air strikes."

The accounts could not be independently confirmed nor the conflicting numbers reconciled, but fears had been growing for the welfare of Yazidis in the village since the Islamic State siege began on Aug. 7.

The U.S. Central Command said Friday that it had carried out a drone attack south of the town of Sinjar after receiving reports of an attack in the area. The drone "struck and destroyed two vehicles," it said.

The alleged killings came a day after Obama called off plans for a military evacuation of Yazidis trapped on Mount Sinjar, saying they were no longer at risk. If confirmed, the events in Kocho would constitute the worst single atrocity committed against the Yazidis since the Aug. 3 assault on Sinjar triggered a humanitarian crisis and contributed to the Obama administration's decision to intervene.

At least 10 U.S. airstrikes and drops of food and medicine have since helped tens of thousands of Yazidis reach safety after they sought refuge on the mountain nearly two weeks ago, then got stranded in the barren terrain without water or food.

Obama declared Thursday that the U.S. effort "broke the ISIL siege of Mount Sinjar." A team of U.S. Special Forces and aid officials dispatched to the mountain Wednesday concluded that the intervention had dispelled the imminent threat to the lives of Yazidis, he said.

But although the airstrikes appear to have helped those trapped on the mountain reach safety, people who did not join the initial exodus are still at risk, Yazidis say.

"The sole mission of the airstrikes was to protect the people on the mountain, not to free anyone outside the mountain," said Murad Ismael, a Yazidi activist based in Washington.

Kocho is south of the town of Sinjar, from which the exodus took place, and many residents were unable to join the flight because they were cut off by the Islamic State advance, according to Yazidi refugees in northern Iraq.

After the Islamic State fighters surrounded the village last week, they issued a deadline of Sunday, which was extended to Monday, then extended again several times as the week wore on.

On Friday, the fighters moved in, apparently unopposed.

Ismael said he believed the Islamic State was emboldened to strike against the village after Obama called off the evacuation plan. The Islamic State fighters "did not kill [the people in Kocho] when there was air coverage," he said. "They started killing only after Obama said the siege is over. They got the message and decided to kill these people."

Obama has said the airstrikes will continue, even though the plan to evacuate Yazidis from the mountain has been dropped, and stressed that Iraqis still face a "dire" threat from the Islamic State.

The administration also has said it will send arms directly to Kurdish forces, with the approval of Iraq's central government.

On Friday, the effort to arm the Kurds against the Islamic State received a boost when the European Union gave its blessing to individual European nations sending weapons. The E.U. also said it would look for ways to prevent Islamic State jihadists from benefiting from oil sales.

So far, France and the Czech Republic have said they will supply arms, and other countries, including Germany and the Netherlands, have indicated they are open to the possibility. British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond said Britain would "consider favorably" any Kurdish request for weapons.

At the United Nations, Iraqi Ambassador Mohammed Alhakim said his government has asked the United States to increase its airstrikes against the Islamic State in Iraq beyond the limits set by Obama of targets related to humanitarian missions and protection of U.S. personnel. "We are working with the United States on this," Alhakim said.

His remarks followed the U.N. Security Council's unanimous adoption of a resolution condemning the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, or the al-Nusra Front, and ordering all U.N. member states to take action to prevent terrorist recruits from traveling to the region and to stop efforts to finance them.

In a release Friday by the U.S.-backed Syrian Opposition Coalition, Syrian rebels fighting against the Islamic State and the al-Nusra Front, as well as government forces, said they were in desperate straits in the northwestern area near the Turkish border and pleaded for supplies from the West that have been withheld from them but are flooding into Iraq.

"We have limited time to face this danger," rebel commander Abdallah Awda said. "All of Syria's neighbors will be threatened by ISIS." ISIS and ISIL are acronyms for alternative names for the Islamic State.

Karla Adam in London and Karen DeYoung in Washington contributed to this report.

Convert or die

HRWF (09.08.2014) - On 18 July, the BBC published an article on its website which was entitled ""Iraqi Christians flee after Isis issue Mosul ultimatum":

"The Islamist militant group Isis has told Christians in Mosul to convert to Islam as Jiyar Gol reports.

Iraqi Christians are fleeing Mosul after Islamist militants threatened to kill them unless they converted to Islam or paid a "protection tax".

A statement issued by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Isis) was read out at the city's mosques.

It called on Christians to comply by midday on Saturday or face death if they did not leave the northern city.

Isis has control of large parts of Syria and Iraq and said last month it was creating an Islamic caliphate.

The ultimatum cited a historic contract known as 'dhimma,' under which non-Muslims in Islamic societies who refuse to convert are offered protection if they pay a fee, called a "jizya".

'We offer them three choices: Islam; the dhimma contract - involving payment of jizya; if they refuse this they will have nothing but the sword,' the Isis statement said."

These Christians are now IDPs in Iraqi Kurdistan or are looking for a safe haven in neighbouring countries, in the EU and in the United States. If they do not want to convert under coercion or to die, the last option is to emigrate. Not a solution.

Qaraqosh falls, thousands flee

World Watch Monitor (08.08.2014) - Armed jihadists of the so-called "Islamic State" took over Iraq's largest Christian town, Qaraqosh, and nearby Christian settlements early Thursday, forcing thousands of Christians to flee to Kurdish-controlled areas. Statements of anguish and calls for intervention have been issued by Pope Francis and other Christian leaders.

The US President Barack Obama has authorised two operations to prevent genocide in Iraq. One operation is targeted airstrikes to protect US personnel and the other is a humanitarian effort to help the thousands of displaced Iraqi civilians, mostly religious minorities, who have been forced out of their homes by the Islamic State, IS.

In addition to Christians, tens of thousands of ethnic Yazidis have fled to the mountains outside Qaraqosh, where they are surrounded by the Sunni militants and exposed to temperatures well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 Celsius) without access to water or other supplies. The United Nations' children -relief agency, UNICEF, says at least 40 Yazidi children have died (http://www.unicef.org/media/media_74676.html).

As many as a quarter of Iraq's remaining Christians are reported to be on the run, according to the BBC (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28686998>). Louis Sako, patriarch of the Chaldean Church in Iraq, told Agence France-Press the advancing Sunni militants have occupied churches, ripped down crosses and destroyed manuscripts.

The Islamic State, which previously called itself the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, IS or ISIS, also has captured Mosul Dam (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/08/world/middleeast/isis-forces-in-iraq.html?_r=0), Iraq's largest, after driving off the Peshmerga defense forces of Kurdistan, the autonomous region of northern Iraq.

Qaraqosh, a city of about 50,000 people in Iraq's Nineveh Province, sits between Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, and Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish region, to the east. The Islamic State took over Mosul in July, and many of the city's remaining Christians fled eastward to Qaraqosh, sometimes called the Christian capital of Iraq.

Kurdish Peshmerga troops had been pushed back from several points surrounding Mosul during an IS offensive during the weekend, including the town of Sinjar and Zumar, west

of Mosul. The BBC reported that the Peshmerga commander in Qaraqosh informed the archbishop late Wednesday that the Kurdish forces would withdraw. There were reports of mortars being fired into Christian towns near the front lines east of Mosul, and Qaraqosh fell during the early hours of Thursday.

"I now know that the towns of Qaraqosh, Tal Kayf, Bartella and Karamlesh have been emptied of their original population and are now under the control of the militants," Joseph Thomas, the Chaldean archbishop of Kirkuk and Sulaimaniyah, told AFP (<http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/iraqs-largest-christian-town-conquered-by-islamic-state-1460126>).

Following the capture of Sinjar and Zumar during the weekend, tens of thousands of residents fled into the hills between the two cities. Many are Yazidi, a Kurdish group with links to Zoroastrianism, and whose beliefs are regarded by some Sunni Muslims as satanic. They have been stuck without food or water.

"Many of the displaced are in immediate need of essential life-saving humanitarian items, including water, food, shelter and medicine," said UN spokesman David Swanson.

Archbishop Thomas called the situation a "catastrophe."

"Tens of thousands of terrified people are being displaced as we speak, it cannot be described," Thomas told AFP.

Chaldean Patriarch Louis Sako told AFP said the jihadist advance has touched off a frantic dash for Kurdistan.

"There are 100,000 displaced Christians who have fled with nothing but their clothes, some of them on foot, to reach the Kurdistan region," AFP quoted him as saying. "This is a humanitarian disaster. The churches are occupied, their crosses were taken down."

Pope Francis issued an "urgent appeal" to the international community Thursday, asking for a coordinated response "to ensure all necessary assistance - especially the most needed aid - to the great multitude of displaced persons whose fate depends entirely on the solidarity of others."

In the United States, President Barack Obama is considering airstrikes against IS forces and airdrops of humanitarian supplies to the refugees, the New York Times reported (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/08/world/middleeast/obama-weighs-military-strikes-to-aid-trapped-iraqis-officials-say.html>) . CNN also reported (<http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/07/world/middleeast/stopping-isis/index.html>) that a defense department official said "other military options" are under consideration.

France on Thursday called for an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council. The World Council of Churches, as well as Iraq's Chaldean prelates, Thomas and Sako, issued similar pleas.

"We call on the UN Security Council to immediately intervene. Tens of thousands of terrified people are being displaced as we speak, it cannot be described," Thomas said.

Said Sako: "Today we appeal with lots of pain and sadness, to all people of good will, the UN Security Council, European Union and relief organisations, to help those people who are facing mortal danger."

He added: "I hope it is not too late to avoid genocide."

The sudden collapse of Qaraqosh is the latest of a series of jihadist blows to Iraq's Christians. Since their offensive began in June, IS has ordered Christians in captured towns to either convert to Islam, pay a tax to remain Christian, or die. In one instance, sources have told World Watch Monitor that militants from Islamic State (IS) beheaded a Christian simply for asking why he was being stopped in the street.

The man was murdered in IS occupied Northern Iraq on Sunday July 27.

The violent incident is just one of many given to World Watch Monitor by sources in Mosul and Erbil, 60 miles east of in the autonomous region of Kurdistan and currently attracting thousands of Christian refugees.

His wife, who was with him at the time of the attack, later told a priest and members of a church in Erbil what happened.

As the Christian couple fled Mosul, the source said, they were stopped for questioning by militants, one of them armed. The woman's husband repeatedly asked why IS kept detaining Christians. The one with the weapon got angry at this and hit the husband over the head, causing severe bleeding. The injured man screamed in pain from the blow, but this further angered the armed militant who went over to the man, cut off his head and placed the severed head on the man's stomach.

The man's wife, by now hysterical and in shock, was bundled into a car by the militants and the driver told to take her away.

Other reports have reached World Watch Monitor that similarly brutal attacks are being made on Christians as they flee Mosul following the ultimatum giving them until 19 July to either convert to Islam, pay a tax or leave.

A woman told World Watch Monitor that her 80-year-old husband, who had also confronted IS members, had his hands and legs cut "Look, you got angry and questioned IS too but you survived. Thank God," she said.

A third incident was reported by a couple in their 50s who had fled Telkif, 15 miles north of Mosul, and arrived at the church in Erbil. During their escape the man had broken his leg. After visiting the hospital in Erbil he arrived at the church and told its members what had happened.

"We left Mosul on Wednesday (July 23) going to Telkif," said the man. We didn't have anywhere to stay so we slept in the street, among the houses. When people saw us there they brought us some food to eat."

The couple has a son, but, added the woman: "Our son, we sent him to Alqosh.

"But fights started in Telkif," she continued, "and we jumped out to escape but my husband stumbled and his leg broke in two more places."

The church members who heard this story told World Watch Monitor they were thankful the couple had made it to Erbil. "They were scared when they told their story, but they need others to listen otherwise they will remain traumatized."

Sources also report an increase in threatening behaviour, which is frightening Christians and creating a sense of instability. Before the recent Eid, members of IS sent messages to monasteries in the Nineveh Plain saying that "we will celebrate Eid" in your town.

IS has turned St Michael's monastery into a barn to keep animals. The fourth century building is near the River Tigris.

A young family of five were attempting to flee Mosul when they were stripped of nearly all their possessions, including clothes for their children. The mother said: "They stole our

car with everything I had brought for my children - their clothes, a washing machine, food, medicine, jewellery for the girls. I hid my wedding ring in the diaper of my 10-month-old baby but they took my new phone.

"My 80-year-old father in law got angry and demanded they return our things but they said to him: 'Do not speak or we are going to hurt you'.

As they were taking our car I managed to grab two bags of the girls' clothes and then we ran away."

The family have now relocated to Erbil and the mother, who is a graduate Chemist, will try to find work there. They will try to rent a house and place the children in schools, but she is questioning whether even Erbil is safe: "Do you think IS will enter Erbil? Is it safe here because people from Mosul are still afraid?"

As well as valuable items, IS took IDs, marriage certificates and land and property registration documents as Christians were leaving Mosul. They tore up these documents. Sources have also revealed that IS had already stated that any property left empty will become the property of the IS armed group.

Price rises are foreshadowing economic collapse in Mosul. In July blocks of ice were selling at 10,000 Iraqi Dinars (8.5 USD or 5 British pounds at current rates), one litre of car fuel was 2,500 ID. It is feared the supply of goods will become even worse if routes through Kurdistan are cut off. Other services are suffering - electricity is only on for two hours each day, water is not available across the city anymore and medicines are becoming scarce.

Early July sources revealed a scam from estate agents in Baghdad. Christians were receiving letters containing a bullet and a demand saying "leave you crusaders". The agents were exposed and arrested by Iraq's Ministry of the Interior. They confessed to wanting to persuade Christians to sell property at a cut price so it could be bought cheap. The agents also confessed to supplying home-owners' details to militants.

World Watch Monitor has also been told that IS had informed Muslims living near the Holy Spirit Church, east of Mosul, to leave their homes because the church would be bombed. Families were told to leave their houses after Iftar (eating after a Muslim fast) for their own protection. The explosions raised the church building to the ground.

Earlier in July IS had set fire to a room attached to the altar of 'Noah's Ark church', as it was also known because it is designed to look like a ship.

Bishop Faraj Rahho opened Holy Trinity Church in 2005 but he was killed in 2008 after a widely publicized kidnapping. When he was ordained Archbishop of Mosul in 2001 he had responsibility for 20,000 Catholics. Rahho had expressed unease at moves to incorporate Sharia law into the Iraqi constitution. He often led worship in difficult situations and had been threatened before by gunmen. One of the demands made by the kidnappers was that Iraqi Christians form a militia to fight US forces based in Iraq at the time. The Archbishop's body was found in a shallow grave in March 2008.

On 24 July, many of the Iraqi Christians who had already left Mosul marched in protest from their refugee camp in Ankawa to the UN base in Erbil. The demonstrators braved temperatures of 50 degrees centigrade to demand the UN help protect them against IS militants.

Sahar Mansour, a Chaldean Catholic who fled Mosul in June, told the Catholic News Service that she had heard horrific accounts of violent forced conversions of Christians who were unable to flee Mosul because of ill health or disability.

"I did not imagine that one day I would live like this, without human rights, drinking salty water out of wells, without electricity and a house, in this heat," she said.

Mansour and her family are among 3,500 Christian families encamped around Ankawa, on the outskirts of Erbil.

200,000 Assyrians have fled the Nineveh Plain in the last 24 hours

AINA (07.08.2014) - The push of the Islamic State (IS) from Mosul north into the Nineveh Plain, the last stronghold of Assyrians in Iraq, has created fear and panic in the population, causing a massive exodus from Assyrian villages. The influx of refugees into Ankawa and Noohadra (Dohuk) has overwhelmed the towns. There is a shortage of everything - shelter, food, water. Displaced Assyrians are sleeping on sidewalks and in open fields.

AINA spoke to several government officials by telephone regarding the crisis in the Nineveh Plain. These same officials have also fled with the rest of the population.

Yesterday at midnight a column of IS vehicles entered Tel Kepe and took control of the city, whose population had already fled north. IS is now marching to Batnaya and Telsqof, which have been abandoned.

All of the population of the city of Alqosh has fled.

The massive exodus of Assyrians was precipitated in part by the withdrawal of Kurdish forces from the Nineveh Plain. With no one left to defend them, Assyrians followed the retreating Kurdish forces.

Baghdede is now nearly completely empty of Assyrians. The exodus began yesterday morning at 2:30 A.M when Kurdish forces announced they were withdrawing. The Bishops ordered all churches to ring their bells to warn the residents to flee and the exodus began.

After the Kurdish forces withdrew IS took control of the city and the surrounding areas, including Karamles and Bartella.

Last night and this morning IS robbed Assyrians as they fled Baghdede.

It is estimated that 200,000 Assyrians have fled the Nineveh Plain, heading north to Dohuk, Sarsink and Zakho and east to Ankawa and Arbel. The following is a list of Assyrian villages and towns which are now completely abandoned:

1. Baghdede (Qaraqosh)
2. Karamlis
3. Bartella
4. Bashiqa
5. Tel Kepe
6. Batnaya
7. Telsqof
8. Alqosh

Seven Yazidi villages and fifteen Shabak villages surrounding Baghdede have also been abandoned, as well as most small villages in the Nineveh Plain north of Mosul.

Many Assyrians who fled to Arbel began to flee again when IS and the Kurds clashed 25 miles West of Arbel yesterday, they headed northwest to Diana and Rawondo.

The situation of the Assyrian refugees is critical. There are thousands who fled on foot and are stranded on the roads without food or water, with many handicapped and disabled people. For those fortunate to have cars, they are unable to find shelter and are sleeping in their cars.

The Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East sent a letter Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary General of the United Nations, urging action on the crisis in North Iraq (AINA [2014-08-07](#)).

Islamic State pulls down church crosses in northern Iraq as 200,000 flee

The Telegraph (07.08.2014) - Islamic State jihadists who took over large areas of northern Iraq overnight have forced thousands of Christians to flee and occupied churches, removing crosses and destroying manuscripts, Chaldean Patriarch Louis Sako has said.

"(The Christians) have fled with nothing but their clothes, some of them on foot, to reach the Kurdistan region," Patriarch Sako told AFP.

"This is a humanitarian disaster. The churches are occupied, their crosses were taken down," said Sako. He added that up to 1,500 manuscripts were burnt.

The United Nations put the number of people who have fled as high as 200,000, and said that many thousands of people trapped by the militants on Sinjar mountain had been rescued in the past 24 hours.

"We're just receiving the information right now. We've just heard that people over the last 24 hours have been extracted and the UN is mobilising resources to ensure that these people are assisted on arrival," David Swanson, a spokesman for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, told Reuters.

It is a "tragedy of immense proportions", he said.

Pope Francis called on the international community to protect Iraq's Christian community.

A statement delivered by his spokesman said the Pope joined the urgent appeals for peace from bishops in the Middle East and called on the international community to "ensure the necessary help" reaches people fleeing fighters from the Islamic State.

The US denounced the jihadist offensive, warning the situation for civilians driven from their homes threatens to become a "humanitarian catastrophe".

"It is a situation that that we are looking at very closely," White House spokesman Josh Earnest said, following reports that President Barack Obama was actively considering military intervention.

Islamic State militants overran Qaraqosh, Iraq's largest Christian town, after pushing back Kurdish troops across a large area of the north of the country, fleeing residents and Christian clerics said.

Jihadists moved in overnight to claim several Christian towns, forcing tens of thousands of people to flee, having pushed back Kurdish peshmerga troops, who are stretched thin across several fronts in Iraq.

"I now know that the towns of Qaraqosh, Tal Kayf, Bartella and Karamlesh have been emptied of their original population and are now under the control of the militants," Joseph Thomas, the Chaldean archbishop of Kirkuk and Sulaimaniyah, told AFP.

"It's a catastrophe, a tragic situation. We call on the UN Security Council to immediately intervene. Tens of thousands of terrified people are being displaced as we speak, it cannot be described," the archbishop said.

The Islamic State group posted a statement online later on Thursday, confirming that they had taken control of Mosul Dam - Iraq's largest dam - and vowed to continue "the march in all directions," adding that it will not "give up the great Caliphate project".

The group added that it has seized a total of 17 cities, towns and targets - including the dam - over the past five days. The statement could not be verified but it was posted on a site frequently used by the group.

The overnight advance came after the Sunni militants inflicted a humiliating defeat on Kurdish forces in a weekend sweep in the north.

Several residents contacted by AFP confirmed that the entire area in northern Iraq, home to a large part of the country's Christian community, had fallen to the Islamic State jihadist group.

Tal Kayf, the home of a significant Christian community as well as members of the Shabak Shiite minority, also emptied overnight.

"Tal Kayf is now in the hands of the Islamic State. They faced no resistance and rolled in just after midnight," said Boutros Sargon, a resident who fled the town and was reached by phone in Arbil.

"I heard some gunshots last night and when I looked outside, I saw a military convoy from the Islamic State. They were shouting 'Allahu akbar' (God is greatest)," he said.

Who are the Yazidis? Profile of Iraq's misunderstood 'devil worshippers'

The Telegraph (07.08.2014) - The 40,000 Iraqis stranded on a mountain and facing possible genocide at the hands of surrounding Islamic State fighters are the last surviving community in their ancestral homeland of the Yazidis, long misunderstood by the outside world as "Devil-worshippers".

One of the most persecuted minorities in the Middle East, the Yazidis in fact find even the mention of the word "Satan" profoundly offensive, and have kept their ancient religion alive despite centuries of oppression.

The Yazidis mark themselves out as different. They never wear the colour blue. They are not allowed to eat lettuce. Many of the men wear their hair in long plaits that make them resemble nothing so much as Asterix and Obelix.

They believe one of their holy books, the Black Book, was stolen by the British in colonial times and is being kept somewhere in London.

But in their home town of Sinjar, from where they have now fled to the mountains above, they were welcoming in a way that belied their fearsome reputation as Satanists.

For ordinary Iraqis, they are bogeymen to frighten children with. But for religious extremists through the centuries, they have been Devil-worshippers to be slaughtered.

The misidentification came about because the Yazidis worship a fallen angel, the Malek Tawwus, or Peacock Angel. But, unlike Lucifer, the Yazidis' fallen angel was forgiven by God and restored to heaven.

Their religion is not just an offshoot of Christianity or Islam. They do not believe in heaven or hell, but in reincarnation, which they describe as the soul "changing its clothes".

They have kept their religion alive through the Talkers, men who are taught the entire text of their missing holy book by memory as children, and who in turn pass it on to their own sons.

The Yazidis once lived in a wide area, across Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Georgia and Armenia. But they have been driven from their homelands, and most have fled to Australia, Canada and Germany. Against all the odds, Iraq is the one place in the Middle East where a sizeable community remains.

They have been persecuted both for their religious beliefs, and for their ethnicity. In Turkey, they faced double discrimination as both non-Muslims and Kurds, and were forced to carry identity cards that listed their religion as "XXX". In Georgia and Armenia, they fell foul of nationalist movements after the fall of the Soviets.

The Yazidis speak Kurdish – they claim theirs is the ancient Kurdish religion – but they have a troubled history with their Kurdish neighbours too.

Their traditions make them highly visible as a separate community. The Yazidis do not practise arranged marriage, like other communities in the region. They have a formal system of elopement, where a man must "kidnap" his bride. If the woman is willing, the parents have to accept the match.

There are darker sides to the Yazidis. They have a tradition of killing any of their members who leave the religion, and 2007 it was reported that Du'a Khalil Aswad, a Yazidi woman, was stoned to death for converting to Islam and marrying a Muslim man.

The Yazidis say they have survived 72 genocides. Now there are fears the last community of them in the Middle East is facing another.

Iraqi Yazidis stranded on isolated mountaintop begin to die of thirst

The Washington Post (05.08.2014) - Stranded on a barren mountaintop, thousands of minority Iraqis are faced with a bleak choice: descend and risk slaughter at the hands of the encircled Sunni extremists or sit tight and risk dying of thirst.

Humanitarian agencies said Tuesday that between 10,000 and 40,000 civilians remain trapped on Mount Sinjar since being driven out of surrounding villages and the town of Sinjar two days earlier. But the mountain that had looked like a refuge is becoming a graveyard for their children.

Unable to dig deep into the rocky mountainside, displaced families said they have buried young and elderly victims of the harsh conditions in shallow graves, their bodies covered with stones. Iraqi government planes attempted to airdrop bottled water to the mountain on Monday night but reached few of those marooned.

"There are children dying on the mountain, on the roads," said Marzio Babilie, the Iraq representative for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). "There is no water, there is no vegetation, they are completely cut off and surrounded by Islamic State. It's a disaster, a total disaster."

Most of those who fled Sinjar are from the minority Yazidi sect, which melds parts of ancient Zoroastrianism with Christianity and Islam. They are considered by the al-Qaeda-inspired Islamic State to be devil worshippers and apostates.

The dramatic advance of the extremist Sunni fighters has torn the ethnic and religious fabric of the country, with Christians and Shiites also uprooted from cities and towns.

The Islamic State's takeover of Sinjar, the first major setback for Kurdish forces protecting the country's north, sent about 200,000 people fleeing, according to the United Nations. Some 147,000 have arrived in the semi-autonomous Kurdish region, flooding refugee camps.

Most of those stranded on Mount Sinjar had run out of battery life on their cellphones by Tuesday, but the few that still could communicate gave grim updates.

On Tuesday, 10 children and one elderly woman died, while on Monday, seven children had perished, said 23-year-old Shihab Balki, who was trapped with his mother, sister and four brothers. "I saw their bodies with my own eyes."

He later texted the news of another casualty: a young man who had died of thirst, leaving his wife and five children behind. UNICEF said that 40 children had died after being displaced from their homes in the area in the 48 hours ending Monday night, including an unknown number on the mountain. The agency did not have figures for Tuesday.

In Baghdad, parliamentarians complained bitterly about the plight of the displaced, their discussions temporarily overshadowing wrangling over the nomination of a prime minister.

"Children have died because of dehydration and lack of food," Vian Dakheel, a Yazidi parliamentarian from Sinjar, said through tears. "My people are being slaughtered," she continued, referring to reports of mass killings of those who had stayed behind.

The ancient and secretive Yazidi sect, whose members number no more than 600,000 across Iraq, has suffered persecution for centuries.

Islamic State posted the first pictures of its capture of Sinjar on social networking sites on Tuesday. One showed six men lying face-down in a field, a pistol pointed at the backs of their heads. "Kill them wherever you find them," read the caption.

Salem al-Sinjari, a 45-year-old teacher, said he'd seen around 25 bodies piled in the streets as he fled Sunday, leaving early enough to catch a ride to the Kurdish region. His mother, five brothers and two sisters wound up besieged on the mountain. He said he last spoke to them Monday before their last cellphone battery died.

Iraqi Kurdish security forces known as pesh merga are attempting to secure a road from the mountain to the nearby city of Rabia, but the process involves clearing villages where locals are sympathetic to the militants, said Majid Shingali, another local parliamentarian, who left Sinjar on Saturday.

Kurdish factions in neighboring Syria say they are entering Iraq to assist this country's Kurds as they face Islamic State along a 650-mile front.

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), designated a terrorist organization by the United States for its armed struggle against the Turkish state, also called for all Kurdish factions to unite against the Sunni extremists.

Babille, UNICEF's Iraq representative, said that U.N. agencies have offered the Iraqi government technical assistance with airdrops but have yet to be asked for help. At least 15 to 20 flights would be needed just to provide those stranded with enough water and supplies to survive for a week, he said.

"We need to get them out," he said. "If we don't, it would be catastrophic."

Mustafa Salim contributed to this report.

All 45 Christian Institutions in Mosul destroyed or occupied by ISIS

AINA (29.07.2014) - Since taking over Mosul on June 10, ISIS has destroyed, occupied, converted to mosques, converted to ISIS headquarters or shuttered all 45 Christian institutions in Mosul.

The following is the complete list of the Christian institutions in Mosul, grouped by denomination.

Syriac Catholic Church:

1. Syrian Catholic Diocese - Maidan Neighborhood, Mosul
2. The Old Church of the Immaculate - Maidan Neighborhood, Mosul (The church goes back to the eighth century AD)
3. The New Church of the Immaculate - Maidan Neighborhood
4. Church of Mar (Saint) Toma - Khazraj Neighborhood
5. Museum of Mar (Saint) Toma - Khazraj Neighborhood
6. Church of Our Lady of the Annunciation - Muhandiseen Neighborhood
7. Church of the Virgin of Fatima - Faisaliah Neighborhood
8. Our Lady of Deliverance Chapel - Shifaa Neighborhood
9. The House of the Young Sisters of Jesus - Ras Al-Kour Neighborhood

10. Archbishop's Palace Chapel - Dawasa Neighborhood

Syriac Orthodox Church:

1. Syrian Orthodox Archdiocese - Shurta Neighborhood
2. The Antiquarian Church of Saint Ahodeeni - Bab AlJadeed Neighborhood
3. Mar (Saint) Toma Church and cemetery, (the old Bishopric) - Khazraj Neighborhood
4. Church of The Immaculate (Castle) - Maidan Neighborhood
5. Church of The Immaculate - Shifaa Neighborhood
6. Mar (Saint) Aprim Church - Shurta Neighborhood
7. St. Joseph Church - The New Mosul Neighborhood

Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East:

1. Diocese of the Assyrian Church of the East - Noor Neighborhood
2. Assyrian Church of the East, Dawasa Neighborhood
3. Church of the Virgin Mary (old rite) - Wihda Neighborhood

Chaldean Church of Babylon:

1. Chaldean Diocese - Shurta Neighborhood
2. Miskinta Church - Mayassa Neighborhood
3. The Antiquarian Church of Shimon alSafa - Mayassa Neighborhood
4. Church of Mar (Saint) Buthyoon - Shahar AlSouq Neighborhood
5. Church of St. Ephrem, Wady AlAin Neighborhood
6. Church of St. Paul - Majmooaa AlThaqafiya District
7. The Old Church of the Immaculate (with the bombed archdiocese)- Shifaa Neighborhood
8. Church of the Holy Spirit - Bakir Neighborhood
9. Church of the Virgin Mary - Drakziliya Neighborhood
10. Ancient Church of Saint Isaiah and Cemetery - Ras AlKour Neighborhood
11. Mother of Aid Church - Dawasa Neighborhood
12. The Antiquarian Church of St. George- Khazraj Neighborhood
13. St. George Monastery with Cemetery - Arab Neighborhood
14. Monastery of AlNasir (Victory) - Arab Neighborhood
15. Convent of the Chaldean Nuns - Mayassa Neighborhood
16. Monastery of St. Michael - Hawi Church Neighborhood
17. The Antiquarian Monastery of St. Elijah - Ghazlany Neighborhood

Armenian Orthodox Church:

1. Armenian Church - Maidan Neighborhood
2. The New Armenian Church - Wihda Neighborhood

Evangelical Presbyterian Church:

1. Evangelical Presbyterian Church - Mayassa Neighborhood

Latin Church:

1. Latin Church and Monastery of the Dominican Fathers and Convent of Katrina Siena Nuns - Sa'a Neighborhood
2. Convent of the Dominican Sisters, - Mosul AlJadeed Neighborhood

3. Convent of the Dominican Sisters (AlKilma Monastery) - Majmooaa AlThaqafiya District
4. House of Qasada AlRasouliya (Apostolic Aim) (Institute of St. John the Beloved)

Cemeteries:

1. Christian Cemetery in the Ekab Valley which contains a small chapel.

ISIS destroys Jonah's tomb in Mosul, Iraq, as militant violence continues

The Huffington Post (25.07.2014) -The militant group ISIS is continuing its rampage of holy places by destroying the tomb of Jonah, a place thought to be the burial site of the prophet believed by Abrahamic faiths to have been swallowed by a whale or fish.

Civil defense officials in Mosul, Iraq, told CNN that ISIS operatives planted explosives around the mosque containing the tomb then detonated it remotely on Thursday.

A video posted to YouTube, the authenticity of which has not yet been confirmed, shows the destruction of the Sunni Mosque of the Prophet Younis, which is the Arabic name for Jonah. Though ISIS claims to adhere to the Sunni branch of Islam, they have nonetheless targeted multiple Sunni shrines, blowing up or bulldozing any place they deem "unIslamic."

According to The Guardian, people living nearby the mosque told AP that ISIS members had declared that the holy site "had become a place for apostasy, not prayer." The Imam Aoun Bin al-Hassan mosque was also destroyed on Thursday.

The tomb of Daniel, a man revered by Muslims as a prophet though unlike Jonah, he is not mentioned in the Quran, has also been reportedly destroyed. Al-Arabiya reports that Zuhair al-Chalabi, a local Mosul official, told Al-Samaria News that "ISIS implanted explosives around Prophet Daniel's tomb in Mosul and blasted it, leading to its destruction."

AFP reports that an anonymous official said, "Islamic State completely destroyed the shrine of Nabi Yunus after telling local families to stay away and closing the roads to a distance of 500 metres from the shrine."

The tomb of Jonah was a popular place of pilgrimage for people who would come from around the world to see it, before the arrival of ISIS in Mosul. At the end of the video showing the destruction of Jonah's tomb, a man can be heard saying, "No, no, no. Prophet Jonas is gone. God, these scoundrels," according to NPR.

This latest act by ISIS shows their disregard for holy places, even Muslim ones from the Sunni sect they claim to hail from. Sam Hardy, a professor at the American University of Rome, told The Washington Post that he believes this shows that ISIS is willing to destroy, "basically pretty much anything in the Bible." He added, "It indicates they are going for total eradication not just of their enemies but even of the possibility of people living together under their rule."

Leila Fadel of NPR believes that ISIS's destruction of shrines may be a big mistake when it comes to rallying other Muslim militant groups to its cause, especially considering that

it previously declared an "Islamic caliphate." She said, "it may cause a deep rift in the uneasy alliances the Sunni extremist group has made with other Sunni fighting groups marginalized."

Iraq's waterless Christians: The campaign to expel a religion

Bloomberg (22.07.2014) - Qaraqosh is one of the last refuges in northern Iraq for Christians fleeing persecution by the militants of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, who swept into the region in June. A historic Christian city of 50,000 about 19 miles southeast of Mosul, Qaraqosh is under the formidable protection of the well-armed Peshmerga—the Kurdish fighters whose autonomous region disputes the area with both ISIL and the Iraqi central government based in Baghdad. Now, in a further effort to oust Christians from land they have inhabited for two millennia, the Islamic militants have begun turning off a precious utility: water.

Since taking Mosul on June 10, ISIL militants have squeezed Qaraqosh and nearby Christian villages by blocking the pipes that connect the communities with the Tigris river. Without a sufficient number of deep wells to fill the gap, the city must have water trucked in, at huge cost, from Kurdish-controlled areas just 15 miles away. Since ISIL took over key refineries in northern Iraq, the price of fuel has spiked across the region. The parched residents of Qaraqosh must pay about \$10 every other day to fill up emergency water tanks, no small sum in this economically depressed part of Iraq.

Outside one of the town's 12 churches, people queue from 6 a.m. until midnight to get their daily rations from a well. Flatbed trucks are joined by children with pushcarts and riders on bicycles bearing empty jugs. "Our lives revolve around water," says Laith, 28, a school teacher who returned with his family a day earlier from a suburb of Erbil, the Kurdish regional capital, 45 miles away, to which thousands of threatened Christians have migrated. Though aid agencies have erected several water depots around town, supplies are limited, barely enough to sustain large families in the 100-degree-plus heat. Plans to dig new wells will take at least several months to fulfill.

Christians have been fleeing ISIL-controlled territory since the militants and their allies overwhelmed the garrisons of the Baghdad government in Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city and its most Christian. The Islamic State, which sees itself as the restoration of the caliphate to rule all Muslims, immediately imposed anti-Christian rules, ordering Muslim employers to fire Christian workers. The homes of Christian religious leaders were ransacked and occupied by militants. A Christian population as old as the faith shrank from 3,000 families to several hundred in weeks.

On July 18, ISIL ordered non-Muslims to convert or pay a tax last imposed during the Ottoman empire. If not, they would face "death by the sword," according to a decree that was read out in city mosques and broadcast from loudspeakers around town. Many families then fled to Qaraqosh. Keen to absorb the disputed territory, the Kurds dug in around Qaraqosh and three smaller Christian villages, to the relief of refugees and locals who have faced the mortar attacks accompanying ISIL's offensive.

"The [militants] want to erase our history and break our faith," says Father Amanoel Adel Kalloo, a Syrian Catholic priest from Mosul who has taken shelter in Qaraqosh with more than 470 families. "We must struggle to preserve this, but so much has already been lost." Father Yosef, a second displaced clergyman, said that the hard deadline set by the

militants to depart or convert has forced people to abandon homes and businesses, often with little more than a car and some clothing.

Apart from the enforced drought conditions, electrical blackouts last most of the day. Merchants say business has been hamstrung further by a trade "embargo" that ISIL has placed on surrounding Muslim towns that used to trade with Qaraqosh. Shops are mostly shuttered, and work is scarce. Firaz Petros, 27, says the situation has compelled him to car-pool an hour each way to Erbil, where he works in waste disposal. "We're barely earning enough to live," he says, adding that he and fellow local commuters share the cost of a \$45 daily gas bill.

Despite the hardships—and the presence of jihadists less than a mile beyond the city limits—local religious leaders say that must resist the urge to leave, or risk losing their centuries-old identity. For Christianity to endure in Iraq, "we must stay until the end," says Archbishop Basile Casmoussa of the Syrian Catholic church in Mosul, who was kidnapped for a day by radical gunmen in 2005. With his exiled flock in Qaraqosh, he laments that mass is not celebrated in Mosul for the first time in 1,600 years. He draws hope, however, in the fact that churches in Qaraqosh are still drawing crowds. "Our faith is being tested," he says.

Iraqi Turkmen 'left for dead' in desert

Hurryiet Daily News (22.07.2014) - A humanitarian tragedy is unfolding in Iraq as Turkmen who fled the advance of the feared Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) are now succumbing to the region's scorching summer sun as refugees. And with death approaching, many refugees are apoplectic at Turkey and Kurdistan's indifference to their plight.

"There is always someone to look after Kurds and Arabs in Iraq, but there is no one to look after Turkmen. Turks were calling Telafer 'Little Istanbul;' why doesn't Turkey take care of us now?" said Eyat Suttu, 35, noting that said his wife had been seriously ill for five days but that he had not been able to bring her to a hospital because the Iraqi Kurdish peshmarga had not let them enter Arbil.

"We are going to die here under the sun in the dust. Just kill all of us at once and this torture will be finished for all of us," he said.

On June 15, ISIL, who had recently renamed itself as the Islamic State (IS), seized the control of the northern Iraqi city of Telafer, a largely Turkmen city.

Thousands of Shiite Turkmen first fled to the northwestern city of Sinjar in order to flee to either Kirkuk, Baghdad, Karbala or Najaf. However, they have been kept waiting for days in 50-degree weather in the desert by peshmarga forces at the Hazer security checkpoint just outside Arbil.

Hazer is the main security checkpoint between Arbil and ISIL-controlled Mosul. Outside the checkpoint, there are thousands of people from new-born babies to the elderly, who have been trying to survive in tents which they have made from blankets in the desert heat.

Small children and elderly people die every day because of the intense heat, according to refugees waiting at the checkpoint.

'We buried three children'

Mahsoun Habil Muhsin, 35, escaped from Telafer with his wife and five children. "We have been suffering here for a week. The peshmarga doesn't allow us to enter Arbil. Our children are dying because of the heat and diseases. We buried two old women and three children yesterday. There are new-born babies in the camp and they could die at any minute," Muhsin said.

The only area Shiite Turkmen think they can take shelter in in northern Iraq is the peshmarga-controlled city of Kirkuk.

"When ISIL attacked Telafer, we have fled to Sinjar on June 16. But there was no food or water there. So we had to leave Sinjar and come here. However, the peshmarga keeps us waiting here. Why don't they let us go? We are Turkish, why doesn't Turkey take care of us?" Muhsin added.

Hidir Suleiman, 42, who used to be an elementary school teacher in Telafer, fled to Hazer with his nine children. "We left everything we had behind. We didn't even take our ID cards. Elderly people died on the road. Our wives and children are dying here. We just want to get out of here, we don't want anything else. Just save us and allow us to enter a town in Turkey," he said.

Thousands of Turkmen stay in the storage as hot as oven

In addition to Turkmen who have been kept waiting at the Hazer checkpoint, there are also thousands more who have been living inside an empty storage in Arbil. They are being sent to Baghdad, Najaf or Karbala in small number of groups by plane once a week.

Inside the storage, it is much hotter than outside. They have divided the storage into three- to five-square-meter rooms with blankets for each family. There are at least 10 people staying in every room.

Fazil Muhammad, a hammersmith from Telafer, fled Arbil with nine people from his family. "We had had clashes with ISIL for three days, and then the Iraqi army brigade who came from Baghdad fought against them for a week. Then ISIL started to bomb the town. Gen. Abu Walid withdrew his soldiers. We had to run away too. We have been staying here for 30 days, we are waiting to be sent to southern Iraq," he said.

'ISIL killed all those left behind'

Hadi Hasan, who came to the storage a week ago, said ISIL had killed all the Shiites who were not able to flee and who were left behind in Telafer.

"They killed even 40-day-old babies and the elderly. They have blasted all the Shiite mosques. They even killed the animals, cows and sheep. We didn't have time to bury some of the bodies."

Zeynep Ali Ekber, 25, said ISIL militants took away 20 people including her father and her brother from the Bekkekut village of Telafer. "They have arrested many from the other Shiite villages. We haven't heard from them since then," she said.

Kidnapped nuns and orphans in Iraq released

Chaldean Patriarch Overjoyed, Says No Ransom Was Paid

Zenit (16.07.2014) / <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/kidnapped-nuns-and-orphans-in-iraq-released> - The Chaldean Patriarch of Babylon is ecstatic that nuns and orphans being held captive in Iraq have been released.

"I am overjoyed at the release of the two sisters and three orphans," the Patriarch of the Chaldean Church Mar Louis Raphael I Sako said, because it is "finally some good news" in a context of war, violence and division, reported *AsianNews.it*.

Noting that no ransom was paid, he made these remarks upon the news of the release of Sister Atur, Sister Miskinta and the three young children who were seized last June 28. The two Chaldean nuns belong to the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate which ran a foster home for abandoned and orphaned children in Mosul, near the Chaldean Archbishopric.

Their captors were linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS, Sunni jihadists linked to al-Qaeda), which now declares itself the army of the Islamic caliphate.

Expressing his "joy" at the "good news," the patriarch explains that "contacts were established by the people of the city," who helped "in obtaining their release." He added that the sisters and orphans were held "in a house in Mosul, but they were treated well, they were all together. The sisters feared for the safety of the girls, but there were no problems."

The sisters spent "17 days of captivity praying for their release and for peace in Iraq," the patriarch said. According to him, money was not paid in exchange for their release, but the Islamists "just took their car, a new pick-up."

"The sisters are relieved and happy," His Beatitude said, adding, "they have taken their personal belongings and returned to Dohuk," in Iraqi Kurdistan, where they found refuge on having to flee their convent.

The news of the release of the nuns, however, comes amid a climate of war, divisions and violence. UN sources report that, in the month of June alone, at least 2417 Iraqis, including 1513 civilians, have died "in acts of violence or terrorism."

Over 1 million people have fled their homes because of fighting between the army and Islamist militias. It is the worst crisis since December 2011, when U.S. troops left the country. The death toll does not include those of Anbar province, in the hands of Sunni militiamen. (D.C.L.)

Iraqi Christians' flee violence, fear end of long history

By Robin Emmott

Reuters (09.07.2014) - The violence in Iraq is hastening the end of nearly 2,000 years of Christianity there as the few remaining faithful flee Islamic State militants, archbishops from Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk said on Wednesday.

War and sectarian conflict have shrunk Iraq's Christian population to about 400,000 from 1.5 million before the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, and now even those who stayed are leaving for Turkey, Lebanon and western Europe, the prelates said on a visit to Brussels seeking European Union help to protect their flocks.

The three - Chaldean Catholic Patriarch Louis Raphael Sako, Syrian Catholic Archbishop of Mosul Yohanna Petros Mouche and Kirkuk's Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Youssif Mirkis - are all Eastern Catholics whose churches have their own traditional liturgy but are loyal to the pope in Rome.

"The next days will be very bad. If the situation does not change, Christians will be left with just a symbolic presence in Iraq," said Sako, who is based in Baghdad. "If they leave, their history is finished."

The lightening seizure of the northern city of Mosul last month by Muslim Sunni militants sent many residents fleeing. They wanted to return, Mouche said. "But when they did, they found no water, hardly electricity. There's only fear," he said.

Even in Kirkuk, in the safer Kurdish zone, Christians are leaving at a rate of several hundred a day, Mirkis said. "Our presence was a symbol of peace, but there's so much panic and few Christians see their future in Iraq," he said.

Nuns abducted

Christianity in Iraq dates back to the first century, when it was said the Apostles Thomas and Thaddeus brought the Gospel to the fertile flood plains of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates.

Iraq is traditionally home to many different Eastern Rite churches, both Catholic and Orthodox, and their presence was once a sign of Iraq's ethnic and religious diversity.

But many have been displaced inside Iraq or forced to emigrate by conflicts ranging from the Iran-Iraq war to sectarian attacks. Unlike their Sunni, Shi'ite and Kurdish neighbors, Christians have no militias to protect them.

Christian leaders across the Arab world, alarmed by the rise of hardline Islamists in the wake of "Arab Spring" uprisings, have tried to emphasize their long histories in the region and have urged their communities not to leave.

Sako said Christians were not being persecuted for their beliefs by the militants, who were once known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant but are now called the Islamic State, an offshoot of al Qaeda.

Still, two Chaldean nuns and three children were abducted on Monday in Mosul in broad daylight and churches have been closed in the city, he said. Most of the city's minority population, including Christians and small groups like the Shabak Shi'ite Muslims, have fled.

The visit of the three archbishops was organized by Aid to the Church in Need, an international Catholic group that supports churches in difficult situations.

Iraq's minorities under fire

IRIN (09.07.2014) - "The sound of the shelling was terrifying. In my street no-one was left. We were the last family to leave," explained Janda, an Assyrian Christian from Iraq.

Her family of six fled the town of Qaragosh (also known as Bakhida and Hamdaniya) 30km east of Mosul, in northern Iraq, leaving their home in the middle of the night.

Travelling by car, they crossed into the capital of semi-autonomous Kurdistan, where

they sought shelter in a sports hall in the mostly-Christian district of Ainkawa, in the Kurdish capital Erbil.

Janda is one of an estimated 10,000 Christians who fled from the Nineveh Plain - the region to the north and east of Mosul - to Erbil in the space of days in late June to escape militants from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and their clashes with Kurdish armed forces (Peshmerga). The aerial bombing campaign of the Iraqi Security Forces against ISIS has added to the concern.

"We are scared because we have heard rumours that ISIS decapitates people," said Ammar, another Christian, who also left Qaragosh with his wife Iman and their two children, and found refuge in a cramped hall. "What happened to Christians in Syria - we expect the same fate," he added.

In recent months reports have come out of Syria of churches being burned and Christian communities being attacked and forced to convert to Islam.

[<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26366197>]

While not all of them are true, they have stoked deep fear in the Iraqi Christian community.

So far there has been only minor damage to churches inside Mosul - a statue of the Virgin Mary removed and some black ISIS flags hung in place of crosses - though last week two nuns and three orphans went missing, feared kidnapped.

[<http://news.yahoo.com/christian-leader-appeals-missing-iraq-nuns-145013660.html>]

ISIS began its military offensive into northern Iraq in early June, seizing control of large sections of the provinces of Nineveh, Salaheddin and Kirkuk, to add to the swathes of Anbar Province it has held since the turn of the year. On 29 July, it declared the formation of an Islamic caliphate. [<https://news.yahoo.com/al-qaida-breakaway-formally-declares-islamic-state-184155646.html>]

Although people of all faiths and ethnicities are among the 1.2 million people who have been displaced since January, rights groups warn that Christians - along with Iraq's other religious minorities such as Shabak, Turkomans, and Yazidis - are particularly vulnerable to ISIS and also to any political and geographical splits in the country that may come about in the future.

[http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IRQ_snapshot_140623_0.pdf]

"A clear pattern is emerging whereby ISIS is deliberately targeting Iraq's minorities as well as others suspected of opposing the group, singling them out for detention and abduction," explained Donatella Rovera, Amnesty International's senior crisis response adviser, currently in northern Iraq. "Every day I meet families desperate to find their sons, husbands and brothers who have been taken by ISIS groups and whose fate and whereabouts are unknown. Most do not want the names of their missing relatives mentioned because they fear for their safety."

Letta Tayler, senior terrorism and counter-terrorism researcher at Human Rights Watch (HRW), agreed that while atrocities were "happening on all sides", minorities were being "singled out" by ISIS, which follows strict Sunni Muslim ideals.

"Religious minorities are doubly targeted; they are victims of both the general fighting and attacks because of their beliefs," she said. "This has been a traditional pattern in Iraq, but during conflict it increases and these people are panicked. Right now we are seeing an acceleration of a slow-motion mass displacement of religious minorities," she added.

Christians

These attacks are likely to increase a trend for Christian migration: Before the US-led invasion in 2003 there were an estimated 1.3 million Christians living in Iraq, but now there are believed to be as few as 300,000. This has been largely due to increased violence, including a 2010 attack on Our Lady of the Salvation Church in Baghdad, which killed 58 people.

Zaid Al-Ali, an Iraqi lawyer and the author of *The Struggle for Iraq's Future*, said that although Christians were not part of Sunni versus Shia sectarianism, or necessarily targeted because of their religion, during the 2006-2007 surge in violence, when sectarian labels were attached to threats, extortion and kidnapping, Christians were particularly affected.

"Those targeted were largely people who had nowhere to turn, no tribal links, no connections in government and generally lived in more insecure neighbourhoods, and so a lot of the victims happened to be Christian," he said. "Christians have always been targeted, they are the soft belly of Iraq. They don't have the connections to the state like Muslims do and they don't have anyone making a serious effort to look after them."

In the past week, many of the Christians who fled to Ainkawa from Qaragosh have gone back home, according to church leaders. The bombs have stopped for now, but coupled with the difficult conditions due to the lack of water, fuel and electricity, there is also a deep uncertainty about what the future may hold, with ISIS showing no sign of giving up territory it has seized.

Bashar Matti Warda, the Archbishop of the Chaldean Catholic Diocese in Erbil, said: "There is a deep sense of Christians losing trust in the future and we are finding many families who want to leave Iraq altogether which is a big loss for us."

Turkomans

Christians are not the only minority to fear the advance of ISIS: there have been various reports of attacks on Shabak villages; and Turkomans, Iraq's long-persecuted third largest ethnic group, are also being targeted by the insurgents.

Turkomans Front official Aydin Maroof told local media on 6 July that 200 Turkomans have been killed and 200,000 displaced as a result of ISIS attacks in Nineveh and Kirkuk. [<http://basnews.com/en/News/Details/ISIS-Insurgent-kills-200-Shiite-Turkmens/> 25893] According to HRW, on 23 June, ISIS raided the villages of Guba and Shireekhan, close to Mosul and home to Shia Turkomans. Homes and farms were ransacked, four Shia places of worship were blown up, and some 950 Turkoman families were forced out of the area. Other Turkoman places of worship have also been attacked in Tal Afar, 50km west of Mosul, HRW said. [<http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/27/iraq-isis-kidnaps-sa-turkmen-destroys-shrines>] "It is a kind of genocide against Turkomans and against other people of Iraq," Ali Bayatli, from Kirkuk, and the head of the Association of Turkoman Lawyers in Iraq, told IRIN.

Explaining how many of the displaced Turkomans had sought refuge in Kirkuk, he added: "Those people who came to Kirkuk feel they are now in peace, but this is temporary. We don't know what will be tomorrow."

Yezidis

In Bashiqa, a mixed Yezidi and Shabak village about 22km northeast of Mosul, Hussam Salim, a volunteer programme manager for the Yezidi Solidarity and Fraternity League charity, said people were living in fear of ISIS following the release of video footage by the militants of a group of kidnapped Yezidis.

[<http://basnews.com/en/News/Details/ISIS-kidnaps-Yezidis--ask-for-ransom/2497> 3]

"The Yezidi community here feels very threatened by ISIS policies. They feel hopeless here and many people are either leaving to Europe or talking about leaving," he explained.

Yezidis follow an ancient religion related to the Zoroastrian faith. They worship a deity called the Peacock Angel, who was supposedly cast out of heaven by God, and as a result are often branded devil worshippers. Over the years, Iraq's Yezidis, who number around 500,000, have faced significant persecution and attacks, but the advance of ISIS poses a new threat, especially given the community's geographical position in territories long disputed between Kurdistan and Iraq and now on the frontline of ISIS's so-called caliphate.

"ISIS targets different people in different ways but they have rules about certain religions and that makes people here very afraid," Salim said. "At the moment we have the Kurdish Peshmerga forces here, but we know the ISIS line is only 5km away and we can see their checkpoints, so we are very worried."

Despite the chaos, the country's political elite in Baghdad has shown little sign of negotiating a settlement, with parliament again cancelling sessions on 7 July. [<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/07/iraq-parliament-delays-session-until-august-2014779534996922.html>]

Minorities in disputed territory

Kurdish leaders have, meanwhile, seized the moment to call for separation from the rest of Iraq, and Massoud Barzani, president of Iraq's Kurdistan Region, has said he intends to hold a referendum on independence within months.

[<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28103124>]

However, while there is strong support for independence among Kurds in Kurdistan, not all of the minorities living in the disputed territories that the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) wants to claim wish to be defined as Kurdish.

Thirsa de Vries, Iraq senior programme officer for Dutch NGO PAX, said any potential partition added to the vulnerable state of Iraq's minorities and she called on the international community to "be aware" of local politics which, she said, was "part of larger power plays for land and influence".

"For years, identity politics have been used to manipulate the small minorities living on the Nineveh plain - disputed territory between the KRG and the Iraqi central government," she said, adding that her organization had received many reports from Shabaks, Yazidis and Christians pressured to affiliate with both sides and in some cases forced to do so in return for protection.

"The current crisis increases the pressure on minorities to choose sides, and attempts to manipulate their identities increase."

ISIS makes Mosul's Christians pay \$250 poll tax amid economic hardships

The Christian Post (23.06.2014) - ISIS is forcing Christians in Mosul to pay the jizya tax for non-Muslims.

The militant group has imposed a minimum payment of \$250 on Christians in the city, according to Salama Al Khafaji, a member of the Council of the High Commission for Human Rights in Iraq.

The AINA news agency was quoting Arabic language website, Alsumaria News, in its report in which Al Khafaji explained that the amount Christians have to pay will vary depending on their profession.

"The economic situation in Mosul is extremely difficult, and there are no financial resources or job opportunities except for vegetable shops, any other businesses are non-existent," she said.

"Citizens are at a loss now as to how to make ends meet; how can they pay those amounts to ISIS?"

The AINA news agency posted another disturbing report to its site of people in Mosul and other ISIS-controlled areas being forced to send their unmarried women to "jihad by sex".

The report included an image of the original decree in Arabic in which ISIS threatens punishment for those who do not obey their order.

"After liberation of the State of Nineveh, and the welcome shown by the people of the state to their brotherly mujahideen, and after the great conquest, and the defeat of the Safavid [Persian] troops in the State of Nineveh, and its liberation, and Allah willing, it will become the headquarters for the mujahideen," it states.

"Therefore we request that the people of this state offer their unmarried women so that they can fulfill their duty of jihad by sex to their brotherly mujahideen. Failure to comply with this mandate will result in enforcing the laws of Sharia upon them."

Islamic States invades monastery, 'steals everything' from Iraqi Christians

World Watch Monitor (23.07.2014) - After every known Christian is reported to have left Mosul, Islamic State fighters, IS, have now taken over a monastery near the largely Christian town of **Qaraqosh**, 32 miles southeast of **Mosul**. According to Agence France Presse (1), it expelled its three resident monks, a cleric and a few families living there, ordering them to leave on foot with nothing but their clothes.

Members of the self-proclaimed "Islamic Caliphate" stormed the ancient fourth-century monastery Mar (Saint) Behnam, run by the Syriac Catholic church on Sunday July 20.

"You have no place here anymore, you have to leave immediately," a member of the Syriac clergy quoted the Sunni militants as telling the monastery's residents.

According to AFP the monks walked several miles before being picked up by armed Kurdish fighters who drove them to Qaraqosh.

The BBC reported that Syriac Catholic leaders have said priceless manuscripts, about both the history of Iraq and the Church, are now at risk in the monastery.

Militants of IS are reported to have killed Dr. Mahmoud Al-Asali, a professor of Law at the University of Mosul on July 21.

According to Ankawa.com (2), Al-Asali, a Muslim, was killed for objecting to IS looting and destroying Iraqi Christians' possessions in Mosul, but WWM could not independently verify this.

The office and residence of the Syrian Catholic Archbishop of Mosul, Yohanna Petros (in one building) has been burned down.

He is now in Qaraqosh where World Watch Monitor spoke to him: 'My concern now is how to feed and shelter all the people who have fled' he told us.

Syrian Catholic priest Nizar Semaan, who works with Archbishop Moshe, said to Agenzia Fides that the international community has a "disturbing passivity to what is happening in that area."

Semaan continued, "For example, the time has come to include these groups in the list of terrorist organizations condemned by international bodies, and above all it is necessary to make public the names of the countries and forces that finance them. Intelligence agencies and the governments of various countries certainly know where certain weapons and money, that keep these groups going, come from. It would be enough to stop the flow for a month, and these groups would not have any more force."

He also said it is necessary to involve leaders and followers of Sunni Islam in an effort to isolate the jihadist groups.

ISIS demands Christians convert to Islam, pay a fine or face "death by the sword."

On Friday, the Al Qaeda splinter group IS issued an ultimatum to Iraqi Christians living in Mosul. They said by Saturday July 19 at noon (Iraqi time) they must convert to Islam, pay a fine or face "death by the sword."

According to CNN (3), the IS-appointed governor of Mosul, Salman al-Farisi, declared that any family choosing to stay in Mosul and refusing to convert to Islam would be required to pay 550,000 Iraqi dinar (about \$470).

The people who decided to leave, out of fear or an inability to pay the fine, were prohibited from taking with them anything but the clothes they were wearing, and a total of 52 Christian families left Mosul early Saturday morning.

"They told us, 'You are to leave all of your money, gold, jewellery and go out with only the clothes on you,'" Wadie Salim told CNN. Other sources told World Watch Monitor everything had been taken from them at the checkpoints, even including medicines.

On Saturday, Chaldean patriarch Louis Sako, told AFP: "Christian families are on their way to Dohuk and Erbil" in Kurdistan. Bishop Yosip Benjamin in the neighbouring town of Tel Keif, told ***The Telegraph "We're providing people with shelter, food and water ... they can't travel without the money to buy tickets"***. And he said Tel Keif's residents were fearful of suffering the same fate as their Mosul neighbours.

UNICEF confirmed the Christians' exodus from Mosul: Dr Marzio Babilie is its Iraq Representative. "Most of (them) are moving towards the towns of Tilkif, Batnaya and Alqosh. 40 families have moved to the east, towards Qaraqosh, and 30 have been accepted in the province of Dohuk. Twenty families have reached Erbil, the capital of the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan, where a small reception center in collaboration with the Chaldean Archdiocese was set up".

Global Reactions to ISIS

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon has issued a statement "condemning IS attacks in the strongest terms - the systematic persecution of minority populations in Iraq by the Islamic State [of Iraq and Syria] and associated armed groups."

The UN chief highlighted that "any systematic attack on the civilian population or segments of the civilian population, because of their ethnic background, religious beliefs or faith may constitute a crime against humanity."

Late on Monday the 15 member Security Council also "denounced the persecution of Christians and other minority groups in northern Iraq, which used to be home to minority communities that had lived together for hundreds of years before coming under direct attack by the group known as (IS) and its allies".

The U.S. State Department also "condemns in the strongest terms the systematic persecution of ethnic and religious minorities by the terrorist group [IS], adding that the US government was "outraged by ISIS's recent announcement that Christians in Mosul must either convert, pay a tax, leave, or face execution in the coming days."

On 19 July, Human Rights Watch published a report (4) outlining the killing, kidnapping, and threatening of religious and ethnic minorities in Mosul since IS captured Iraq's second largest city on June 10.

"ISIS should immediately halt its vicious campaign against minorities in and around Mosul," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch.

The actions of ISIS have been strongly condemned (5) by Muslim experts. On the ground in Baghdad this Sunday, local Muslims joined Christians at a service to show their solidarity. The New York Times reported (6) a Muslim woman sitting next to a Christian woman who was in tears, whispering to her, "You are the true original people here, and we are sorry for what has been done to you in the name of Islam."

Iraqi Chaldean bishop urges world to act after Mosul's Christians forced to flee

Reuters (20.07.2014) - A senior Iraqi bishop urged the world to act on Sunday after Islamic hardliners drove Mosul's Christians from the northern Iraqi city, effectively ending a presence there dating back to Christianity's earliest years.

"The world must act, speak out, consider human rights," Chaldean Catholic Bishop Shlemon Warduni said on Sunday, a day after a deadline expired for Christians in Mosul to submit to the rule of the radical Islamic State or die.

Hundreds of Christian families left the city ahead of the ultimatum, many of them stripped of their possessions as they fled for safety, the remnants of a community which once numbered in the tens of thousands.

"Gunmen lurking like thieves took everything from them - even women's rings, cars, cell phones... because they are fanatics," Warduni told Reuters by telephone from the city of Arbil, 50 miles (80 km) away in the autonomous Kurdish region.

The bishop said the solution to the crisis should be in Iraq's own hands but the state was weak and divided, and Muslim leaders had failed to speak out.

"We haven't heard from clerics from all sects or from the government," he said. "The Christians are sacrificed for Iraq".

This week the Islamic State, leading a Sunni insurgency which took over Mosul on June 10 and now controlling most Sunni Arab provinces in Iraq, gave the city's Christians a choice: convert to Islam, pay a religious tax, or face the sword.

Church leaders said they told the last few families to leave Mosul, where the al Qaeda offshoot has already painted signs on their houses designating them "property of the Islamic State".

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki condemned the treatment of the Christians and what he described as attacks on churches in Mosul, saying it showed "the extreme criminality and terrorist nature of this group".

He said instructed a government committee which was set up to support displaced people across Iraq to help the Christians who had been made homeless, but did not say when the army might try to win back control of Mosul.

Iraq's security forces, which wilted under the weight of last month's Islamic State-led offensive, have been reinforced by Shi'ite militia fighters and are trying to push back the Sunni militants further south. So far they have failed to take back significant territory from the insurgents.

The Islamic State fighters have also destroyed Shi'ite mosques and Muslim shrines, both of which are considered heretical to their ultra-conservative brand of Sunni Islam.

Pope Francis said he was troubled by the Islamic State ultimatum in his weekly public prayers on Sunday.

"I learned with great concern the news that came from the Christian communities in Mosul and other parts of the Middle East, where they have lived since the birth of Christianity and where they have made significant contributions to the good of their societies," he said.

"Today they are persecuted. Our brothers are persecuted. They've been driven away. They must leave their homes without being able to take anything with them."

One Christian who left Mosul last week described how he fled with his family when he learnt of Islamic State deadline.

"We gathered all our belongings and headed for the only exit. There was a checkpoint on the road and they were stopping cars there," 35-year-old Salwan Noel Miskouni said.

When the militants saw they were Christians they demanded gold and money. The family initially said they had none, one of the fighters took their four-year-old son by the hand and threatened to abduct him.

"My sister emptied her entire handbag with our money and gold and her ID. They let the car pass and the child go," Miskouni said.

A few Christian families had stayed on, he said, hiding with Muslim neighbours who gave them shelter. But for now, he saw no possibility of returning with his family.

"If (the Islamic State) leaves we will probably go back but if they stay it's impossible - because they will slaughter us."

Convert, pay tax or die, Islamic State warns Christians

Reuters (18.07.2014) - Islamist insurgents have issued an ultimatum to northern Iraq's dwindling Christian population to either convert to Islam, pay a religious levy or face death, according to a statement distributed in the militant-controlled city of Mosul.

The statement issued by the Islamic State, the al Qaeda offshoot which led last month's lightning assault to capture swathes of north [Iraq](#), and seen by Reuters, said the ruling would come into effect on Saturday.

It said Christians who wanted to remain in the "caliphate" that the Islamic State declared this month in parts of [Iraq](#) and [Syria](#) must agree to abide by terms of a "dhimma" contract - a historic practice under which non-Muslims were protected in Muslim lands in return for a special levy known as "jizya".

"We offer them three choices: Islam; the dhimma contract - involving payment of jizya; if they refuse this they will have nothing but the sword," the announcement said.

A resident of Mosul said the statement, issued in the name of the Islamic State in Iraq's northern province of Nineveh, had been distributed on Thursday and read out in mosques.

It said Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, which the group has now named Caliph Ibrahim, had set a Saturday deadline for Christians who did not want to stay and live under those terms to "leave the borders of the Islamic Caliphate".

"After this date, there is nothing between us and them but the sword," it said.

The Nineveh decree echoes one that the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, the former name for the Islamic State, issued in the Syrian city of Raqqa in February, demanding that Christians pay the jizya levy in gold and curb displays of their faith in return for protection.

The concept of dhimma, governing non-Muslims living under Islamic rule, dates back to the early Islamic era in the seventh century, but was largely abolished during the Ottoman reforms of the mid-19th century.

Mosul, once home to diverse faiths, had a Christian population of around 100,000 a decade ago, but waves of attacks on Christians since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion to topple Saddam Hussein have seen those numbers collapse.

The resident of Mosul who saw the Islamic State announcement estimated the city's Christian population before last month's militant takeover at around 5,000. The vast bulk of those have since fled, leaving perhaps only 200 in the city, he said.

In Iraq, Christians flee homes amid brutal conflict

AP (16.06.2014) - Over the past decade, Iraqi Christians have fled repeatedly to this ancient mountainside village, seeking refuge from violence, then returning home when the danger eased. Now they are doing it again as Islamic militants rampage across northern Iraq, but this time few say they ever want to go back to their homes.

The flight is a new blow to Iraq's dwindling Christian community, which is almost as old as the religion itself but which has already been devastated since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. During the past 11 years, at least half of the country's Christian population has fled the country, according to some estimates, to escape frequent attacks by Sunni Muslim militants targeting them and their churches.

Now many of those who held out and remained may be giving up completely after fighters belonging to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant swept over the city of Mosul and a broad swath of the country the past week.

"I'm not going back," said Lina, who fled Mosul with her family as the militants swept in and came to Alqosh, about 50 kilometers (31 miles) to the north.

"Each day we went to bed in fear," the 57-year-old woman said, sitting in a house for displaced people. "In our own houses we knew no rest." Like other Christians who fled here, she spoke on condition she be identified only by her first name for fear for her safety.

In leaving, the Christians are emptying out communities that date back to the first centuries of the religion, including Chaldean, Assyrian and Armenian churches. The past week, some 160 Christian families — mostly from Mosul — have fled to Alqosh, mayor Sabri Boutani told The Associated Press, consulting first on the number with his wife by speaking in Chaldean, the ancient language spoken by many residents.

Alqosh, dating back at least to the 1st century BC, is a jumble of pastel-painted homes nestled at the base of a high craggy hill among rolling plains of wheat fields. The village's population of 6,000 is about half Christian and half ethnic Kurds. Located just outside the autonomous Kurdish zone of northern Iraq, Kurdish fighters known as peshmerga have moved into the town to protect it.

Many Christians are deciding that the comparatively liberal and prosperous Kurdish regions are their safest bet.

"Every Christian prefers to stay in Kurdistan," said Abu Zeid, an engineer. He too said he wouldn't be going back to Mosul.

"It's a shame because Mosul is the most important city in Iraq for Christians," he added. Mosul is said to be the site of the burial of Jonah, the prophet who tradition says was swallowed by a whale.

Iraq was estimated to have more than 1 million Christians before the 2003 invasion and topping of Saddam Hussein. Now church officials estimate only 450,000 remain within Iraq borders. Militants have targeted Christians in repeated waves in Baghdad and the north. The Chaldean Catholic cardinal was kidnapped in 2008 by extremists and killed. Churches around the country have been bombed repeatedly.

The exodus from Mosul — a Sunni-majority city that during the American presence in Iraq was an al-Qaida stronghold — has been even more dramatic. From a pre-2003 population of around 130,000 Christians, there were only about 10,000 left before the Islamic State fighters overran the city a week ago.

Abu Zeid estimated that now only 2,000 Christians remain in the city.

"They see no future there," said George Demacopoulos, the director of the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at the Jesuit-run Fordham University in New York.

"There is no short-term solution," he said in a phone interview. "I think the only prescription for a long-term solution is a kind of political stabilization of the region that is enabled without military force."

Christians who have not left Iraq completely often flee their homes to other parts of Iraq when the danger is highest in hopes of returning later.

Boutani, the mayor, said this was the sixth time in 11 years that Christians from other areas have flocked to Alqosh for refuge. He himself fled here from Baghdad in 2009 after a church bombing in the capital.

This is the third time that Adnan, a 60-year-old Mosul shoe shop owner, has sought shelter in Alqosh. He came in 2008 after a priest in Mosul was killed, then again in 2010 after rumors spread of an imminent attack on Christians. Each time, he and his family returned after Iraqi security officials guaranteed Christians' safety.

"They said, we will protect you," he recalled. "But now — where's the government?"

The Vatican for years has voiced concern about the flight of Christians from the Middle East, driven out by war, poverty and discrimination.

During his recent trip to Jordan, Pope Francis met with Iraqi and Syrian Christians and denounced the wars, weapons and conflicts that have forced them from their homes.

"All of us want peace!" Francis told a gathering of refugees near the River Jordan. "I ask myself: who is selling arms to these people to make war?"

In Alqosh, the newcomers and the residents united in prayer at Sunday Mass in the Chaldean Church of the Virgin Mary of the Harvest, held by Friar Gabriel Tooma.

On the church floor was spread a mosaic made of beans, lentils, wheat and other produce from the area, assembled to commemorate the upcoming harvest. Before the service, volunteers hurried to finish the images of Jesus and Mary, and were filling out the details of Pope Francis' face, sketched out with white beans.

"People are afraid of what's coming next," Tooma said. "I fear there will be a day when people will say: 'There were once Christians in Iraq.'"

As he walked with his wife and daughter in the 7th century St Hormoz monastery, built into the hill overlooking Alqosh, Abu Zeid said he went back to Mosul on Friday to see if his house was still standing.

Some of the militants in control of the city tried to show that Christians were welcome.

Gunmen stopped him and asked if he was a Christian, Abu Zeid said. When he nodded back, a gunman told him: "Welcome to your home."

The Chaldean church in Mosul was looted, he said, and he saw gunmen drag the accused thieves to the church and order them to return stolen property.

He and other displaced Christians highly doubt the shows of goodwill. Still, some said they have no choice but to eventually return.

"I'm 60 years old," said Adnan, the shoe salesman. "It would be hard to start over again."

Why Christians are under pressure to exit Iraq

A population of 1.2 million in the 1990's reduced to 300,000

World Watch Monitor (13.06.2014) / https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2014/06/article_3183091.html/ - BBC reports have described ISIS ambitions to create an Islamist caliphate spreading from northern Iraq across to north-west Syria. If ISIS can hold Mosul and consolidate its presence there, it will have taken a giant step towards its goal of creating an Islamist region, controlled by insurgents, that connects Iraq and Syria.

Apart from the overall population being targeted, in the past there has also been ISIS violence explicitly aimed at Christians.

Before this week's attacks about 300,000 Christians were estimated to live in Iraq, out of more than 1.2 million at the beginning of the 1990s. Since then, large numbers have either fled abroad (Jordan, Lebanon and Syria) or to the northern Kurdish region as a result of the severe anti-Christian violence; e.g. church attacks, kidnappings, killings, robberies, rapes and threats.

This exodus of Christians means a loss of pluralism and an increase of intolerance in an already divided Iraqi society.

The Archbishop of Mosul Amel Nona said that in the 11 years following the 2003 US-led overthrow of Iraq's President Saddam Hussein, Christians in Mosul had declined from 35,000 to 3,000. This week, Mosul's last remaining Christians had left their homes, he said.

Describing reports of attacks to four churches and a monastery in Mosul, the Archbishop said: "We received threats... [and] now all the faithful have fled the city. I wonder if they will ever return there."

Some reports, however, say Christians have already returned to Mosul, while other sources claim that all have fled and are unlikely to return.

An organisation partnering with Christians in Iraq has told World Watch Monitor that some families who fled Mosul decided to return due to being unable to find refuge and fearing street fights between the Iraqi Army and the ISIS forces: "some families mentioned it is better to die at home than staying on streets."

Chaldean Priest Qais Kage told Fides Agency, "The advance of the ISIS militiamen is favoured by large tribes and Sunnis clans. What happened in Mosul is significant: such a

big city cannot fall in a few hours without support from within. The chaos and political division of the country, due to sectarian conflicts, promotes the advance of the militants who have come from outside: the Iraqi army has left everything in their hands.”

Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq

Iraq is divided in two parts, the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in the North, officially governed by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) based in Erbil and the large remaining Arab part, controlled by the Iraqi Government in Baghdad. Kurds and Arabs have their own languages and culture. Most of Iraq’s oil resources are found near Kirkuk and Mosul, the border areas between the Kurdish region and Arab Iraq, and these are amongst the most violent places of Iraq. Christians are caught here in the crossfire of two different battles: one for a Kurdish autonomous country and one for a religious cleansing of Iraq by Islamic terrorist groups who wish to make the country purely Islamic. The Kurdish aspiration for sovereignty - a desire three Sunni provinces in Arab Iraq have expressed as well - could well be one of the most destabilising factors for Iraq.

Fleeing to Kurdistan

While the north of Iraq has been developing into a more and more dangerous place for Christians, those who flee to the Kurdish region are now considered refugees inside Iraq.

As refugees they face high unemployment and inadequate housing, plus difficulty in finding schooling (especially university) for their children, inadequate medical care and monthly food rations due to registration problems and discrimination.

ISIS increased extremist Islamic pressures

Iraq remains at number four of the 50 countries listed on the World Watch List ranking the most difficult nations for Christians to live. The list is published annually by Open Doors International, a charity supporting Christians worldwide who live under pressure because of their faith. The situation for Christians in central and south Iraq is as bad as last year, however, the north is developing into a more and more dangerous place for Christians.

The main persecution ‘engine’ in Iraq, says Open Doors, is Islamic extremism. Islamic extremist groups desire a religious cleansing of Iraq and wish to make the country purely Islamic. Since the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the situation has continuously deteriorated due to considerable levels of violence by Islamist militants and insurgent groups. Prohibited under Saddam Hussein, Islamist political parties - Shiite and Sunni - have made their entry to politics and even constitute the majority in parliament.

Since 2003 anti-Western and anti-Christian sentiments tend to go hand-in-hand. These Islamist groups have increased in number in the North, under the influence of the civil war in Syria. One of their aims is fulfilling jihad and thus resulting in annihilation of the country’s Christian population. This situation is aggravated by government impunity.

According to Open Doors International, in general, Iraqi society has increasingly become more Islamic. There is an increase in social control of women, the wearing of the headscarf and observance of Ramadan. Even Christian women in Baghdad and Mosul have been forced to veil themselves in order to move safely outside of their homes.

Explanation of background of ISIS

The group ISIS is an Iraq and Syria-based Sunni extremist group. ISIS follows an extreme interpretation of Islam, promotes sectarian violence and targets those with other opinions as infidels and apostates.

In October 2004 ISIS-leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden. This made the group an affiliate of al-Qaeda. In the first year of the war in Syria, late 2011, ISIS engaged in that war through one of the groups that originally assimilated into ISIS: Jabhat al Nusra. Between the leaders of ISIS and al-Nusra grew a division. This led to a split between the two jihadist groups and later caused infighting between both groups.

The current leader of ISIS is Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri, the man is also known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi or Abu Du'a. ISIS is said to have only some 2500 Iraqi and foreign members in Iraq and some 5000 in Syria, both Syrians as well as many foreigners. ISIS also operates in Lebanon and Turkey.

ISIS has undergone several name changes ranging from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) also known as Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, this abbreviation is mostly used) or in Iraq as Da'ash.

The role the Syrian conflict plays in Iraq

ISIS has said it wants to establish an Islamist-led state (or Caliphate) which straddles across both Iraq and Syria.

The role of the civil war in Syria is significant: it led to a rise in recruitment and funding of Al Qaeda inspired groups in Iraq in 2013.

In the current instability in Syria, the position of Islamist radicals and ant-Christian attitudes should not be underestimated, according to Open Doors. ISIS is now better established in Syria, so Syrians seem to be pressured to choose between Assad and Islamist radicals.

From ISIS-controlled regions in Syria's northern city of Raqqa reports of Christians have emerged of them being given an ultimatum of converting to Islam, being killed or signing a 'dhimmi contract'.

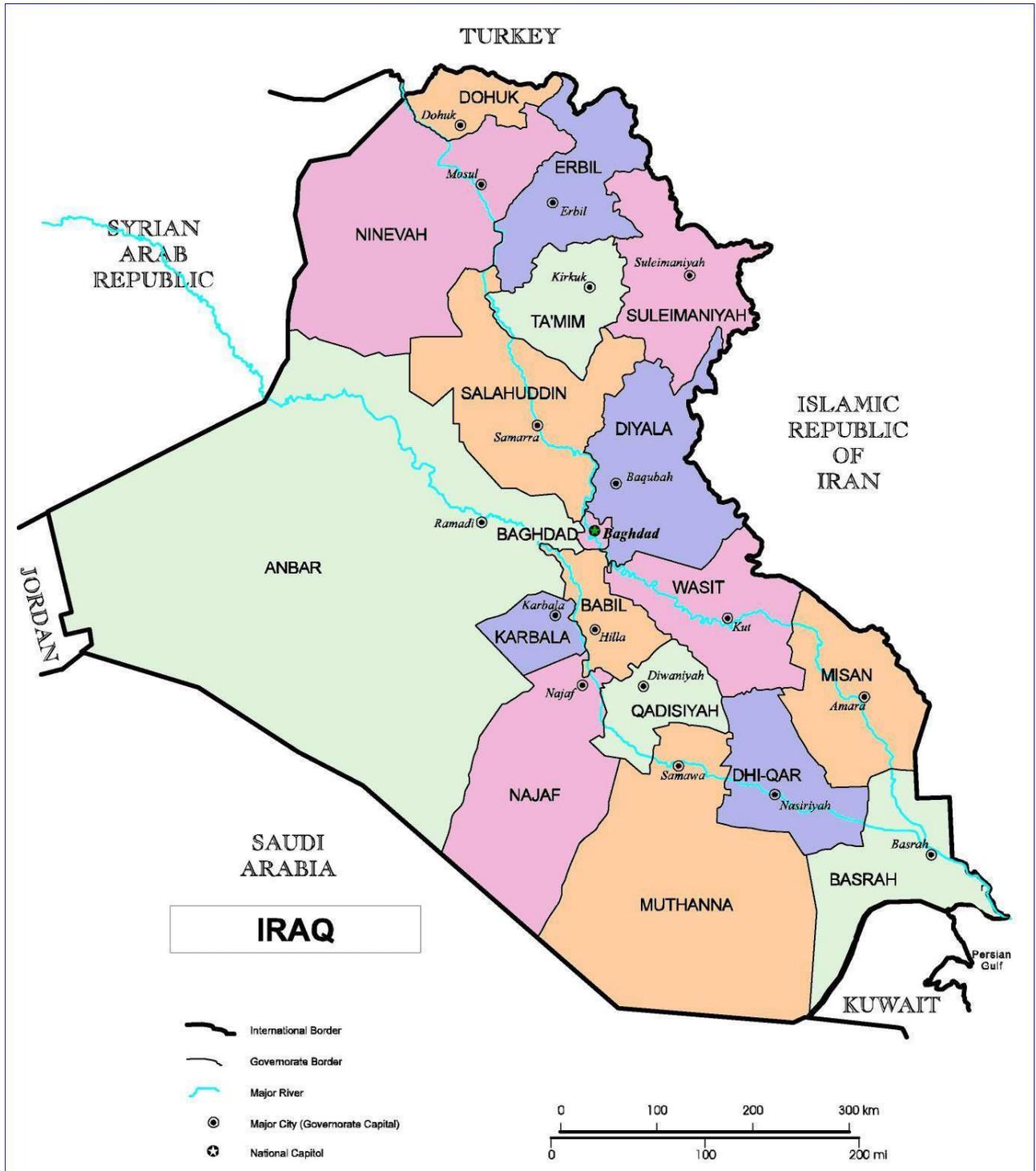
The contract is an integral part of traditional Islamic sharia law dating back to medieval times and requiring non-Muslims, in this instance Christians, to pay protection money which only allows them to gather for worship in churches.

Under the dhimmi contract, public expressions of Christian faith are not allowed. These prohibitions include: Christian wedding and funeral processions; ringing of church bells; praying in public and scripture being read out loud for Muslims to hear; Christian symbols, like crosses, cannot be displayed openly; churches and monasteries cannot be repaired or restored irrespective if damage was collateral or intentional; and Christians are also not allowed to make offensive remarks about Muslims or Islam.

The dhimmi contract also enforces an Islamic dress code, like the veiling for women, and commercial and dietary regulations, including a ban on alcohol.

According to Open Doors, about 20 Christian leaders have signed to contract in Syria. If they keep these rules and live as dhimmis, they will be protected. If not, they will be 'put to the sword'.

Will a province for Assyrians stop their exodus?



By Peter BetBasoo and Nuri Kino

AINA (22.01.2014) - On January 21 the Iraq Council of Ministers approved a plan to establish three new provinces in Iraq. One province would be in Fallujah, in central Iraq; a second would be in north Iraq, in Tuz Khormato; the third would also be in north Iraq, in the Nineveh Plain bordering the Kurdish areas. The Nineveh Plain has the largest population of Assyrians (also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs) in Iraq.

Sargon Slewa, the Minister of Environment and a member of the Iraqi Parliament and of the Assyrian Democratic Organization, one of the largest political parties that represents Assyrians and other Christians in Iraq, requested the establishment of a province in the Nineveh Plain, pursuant to a study of the needs of Christians, as outlined in Iraqi Cabinet meeting 54 in 2011.

The Council of Ministers instructed the State Minister for Provincial Affairs to prepare a study of these projects and submit a report to the Council.

AINA asked internationally renowned journalist and Middle Eastern Expert Nuri Kino to interview Sargon Slewa regarding this important development for Iraq's beleaguered and besieged Assyrian Community.

Nuri Kino: What have you accomplished with this legislation?

Sargon Slewa: One of the main goals and reason for Assyrians to stay in Iraq is to have self administration. This legislation lays the foundation for achieving that goal.

Nuri Kino: Can you tell us where in the process you are?

Sargon Slewa: Recognizing the Nineveh Plain as province by the by the Council of Ministers.

Nuri Kino: How many percent of the inhabitants of the plains are Assyrians-Syriac-Chaldeans?



Sargon Slewa

Sargon Slewa: Almost 40 percent. But still it depends on the borders of the province and which districts will be included.

Nuri Kino: Practically speaking, what does that mean? Will the Nineveh Plain have its own police force? Its own government? Its own budget?

Sargon Slewa: The Ministry of Provincial Affairs will conduct studies and make preparations establish this province, which would have whatever is needed in security, economy and government.

Nuri Kino: What role will the Assyrians play? On what level was the decision made? The Iraqi government? The Parliament? Will there be a voting?

Sargon Slewa: This decision was taken at the governmental level. There are special considerations for the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs. This decision was taken to insure the continued existence of our community in the region. There is much work to be done, but this was the main step and the most difficult hurdle.

Nuri Kino: What does this mean for countries dealing with Iraq?

Sargon Slewa: The international community must pay good attention to this issue, and in light of announcements to receive Christians refugees in Western countries.

Nuri Kino: Tell me about your feelings. What are you feeling and thinking right now?

Sargon Slewa: It is one of the greatest moments of my life. I feel like I want to sleep, like when you have finished an exhausting and satisfying task and you are tired and need a nap.

Reactions From the Assyrian Diaspora

Assyrians outside of Iraq greeted this news with cautious optimism.

Afram Barryakoub, the president of the Assyrian Federation of Sweden, said:

If implemented this could change the reality on the ground for Assyrians and put them in a position to have a say on their future in Iraq, hopefully reversing the emigration to the West.

Attiya Gamri, an Assyrian member of the Provincial Parliament in North Holland, said:

I am very glad the Iraqi Parliament decided this. The Arab and Kurdish political parties will get the chance to show the world they can realize an Iraq with different ethnicities and different religions. In no any other country in the Middle East is this realized; they have the opportunity to show the Assyrians in Iraq and in the Diaspora that they want and will respect national minorities by giving them the same rights as they have. The Arabs and Kurds can show the world that this can be achieved in the Middle East. I hope this will be the first step toward respect politically for the Assyrians in Iraq. What the Assyrians are asking is not something new or different from what the Kurds and Arabs already have.

Dr. Matay Arsan, president of the Assyria Foundation Netherlands, said:

The rest of Iraq should not fear to allow the Christian Assyrians to have a self-administrative region in the Nineveh Plains. They contributed to Iraq's great history and legacy enormously and this could give them the opportunity to do that again. The Iraqi Arabs and Kurds should realize that allowing the Assyrians to protect themselves and receive a part of Iraq's budget would only prove that they, Kurds and Arabs, care for Iraq and its stability.

Robert DeKelaita, executive member of the Chaldean Assyrian Syriac Council of America, said:

We congratulate our people on this first step toward a practical solution for our people and their most difficult plight over the last 10 years in the form of the recognition of the Nineveh Plain province. We thank all of those who participated, whether publicly or privately, in making this dream come true. It is a very first step to be sure. But a very critical first step. We are grateful to all of our parties on the ground, both political and non-political, for their untiring efforts and advocacy. Let it be very clear that we in the Diaspora, in particular through the medium of the Nineveh Council of America and all of the organizations and individuals that support it, intend to give our full support to the positive growth of this province in the interest of our people and all of Iraq.

Speaking from Australia, Hermiz Shahan, Deputy Secretary of the Assyrian Universal Alliance, said:

I would like to thank Mr Nuri al-Maliki, the Iraqi Prime Minister and his Council of Ministers on this rightful decision. My most heartfelt appreciation and congratulations goes to all the thirteen political organisations that gathered in 2010 in the City of Erbil upon request from the Assyrian Universal Alliance and with one voice agreed on the demand on the establishment of a province for the Assyrian people in Nineveh Plain. We also appreciate the efforts of all diaspora Assyrian organisations that pushed for this cause. I believe the next step is to make sure that the borders and the law of this new province will be made in a way that will serve and protect the rights and purpose of the establishment of Nineveh Plain for the Assyrian people in Iraq. I would also recommend that another conference by the coalition of our political organisations and parties in Iraq

to be called inviting all interested parties to affirm that the demands of this nation will be served.

Will the Assyrian Exodus From Iraq Stop?

Since 2004 Iraq's Assyrians have experienced a low-grade genocide (report), with 73 churches bombed, hundreds killed and more than half the Assyrian population forced into exile in Syria, Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon. It is estimated that half of the Assyrians who were in Iraq in 2004 have fled the country (report).

The decision to create a province in the Nineveh Plain comes on the heels of a decision made two weeks ago by The Iraqi National Assembly to recognize Assyrian and Turkmen as official languages. Arabic and Kurdish are also official languages. This decision allows public and private schools at all levels to teach in Assyrian and any other officially recognized language. Government documents are required to be provided in Arabic and Kurdish only.

The decision to make the Assyrian language official also instructs the Minister of Education to open literacy centers for teaching Assyrian. The Ministry of Education has sent a letter to churches to urge people to register for the literacy programs. The government will pay students to attend classes twice a week and issue a certificate of completion.

Many Assyrian observers say these steps are too little and too late. Given the drastic exodus of Assyrians from Iraq and the general mood of the Assyrians, who see no future in a country torn apart by Sunni-Shiite bloodletting and lack of economic opportunities, the Assyrians continue to leave. Recently the Chaldean Church said that six Assyrian families leave Iraq daily. For the first time in their history, there are more Assyrians living outside of Iraq.

Observers also point out that many such decisions have been made in the past but never been implemented, and are adopting a wait and see attitude.
