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Chaldeans face a low-key Christmas

Zenit (13.12.2004)/HRWF (14.12.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - This Christmas will likely be a somber one in northern Iraq.

Chaldean Archbishop Louis Sako of Kirkuk, concerned about the spread of violence, has announced that his community will live this Christmas without great celebrations.

In statements to Fides, the prelate said his Christmas message to the faithful notes that "many families have lost relatives or children, victims of fundamentalist groups or attacks against churches in Mosul and Baghdad."

"Therefore, we have decided that we will not organize receptions during the Christmas days," he said. "We will pray for our country, that the Lord will grant peace to our land."

Archbishop Sako added that the Catholic faithful will express their solidarity with "Muslim brothers who have been unable to celebrate the feast of Id-al-Fitr, at the end of Ramadan."

The Chaldean patriarch of Baghdad, Archbishop Emmanuel III Delly, told Vatican Radio today that "despite the attacks against churches and the bishop's palace of Mosul" on Dec. 7, "we go forward."

"Many Muslims have come to see us to express their regret," he said. "We never forget what the Holy Father is doing for Iraq so that peace and security will be established in this country, martyred for so many years."

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Militants bomb two churches in Mosul

AP (07.12.2004)/HRWF (08.12.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Militants bombed two churches Tuesday in Mosul, wounding three people in a coordinated attack apparently aimed at stirring trouble between religious groups in this ethnically diverse northern city.

Deputy provincial governor Khasro Gouran said one blast struck a church about 2:30 p.m. in eastern Mosul's Wihda neighborhood, wounding three people.

An hour later, gunmen stormed a church in western Mosul, ordering a handful of people outside before bombing it, Gouran said. There were no casualties.

The religious denominations of the churches were not immediately clear.

Islamic militants have regularly targeted different sectors of Iraq's multiethnic population, including the minority Christians, in a bid to disrupt the U.S.-led reconstruction of the war-scarred country.

In August, four churches in Baghdad and one in Mosul were blown up in a coordinated series of car bombings, killing at least seven people and wounding dozens more in the first significant strike against Iraq's minority Christians since the U.S. invasion began last year.

One person was killed and 11 injured in the August bombing in Mosul, where a minority Christian community has for long lived in harmony with the city's Sunni Arab majority, and many say they still do. Any hostility toward Christians was mostly kept in check under the toppled dictator, Saddam Hussein, who didn't allow militant Islamists to gain clout.

But Iraq's community of 750,000 Christians has grown increasingly anxious at the rise of Islamic fundamentalism since Saddam's ouster, and hundreds have fled to neighboring Jordan and Syria.

Some of Iraq's most feared Islamic militant terror networks, such as the Ansar al-Sunnah Army and al-Qaida in Iraq, have claimed responsibility for recent attacks in Mosul, the scene of a wave of violence targeting U.S. and Iraqi forces and Kurds. Senior Muslim leaders have condemned the violence, trying to quell Christian fears they were being routed from the country.

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EU: Parliamentary questions about massacre of Christians in Iraq

HRWF (06.12.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - On August 3, 2004 MEPs Mario Mauro (PPE-DE) and Antonio Tajani (PPE-DE) posed a question to the European Commission about the massacre of Christians on August 1, 2004.

Written questions E-1842/04:

Following the tragic events which took place on 1 August 2004 outside Christian churches in Iraq, the European Union has once again been guilty of a failure to act and an inability to understand the value of religious freedom, the first and most basic of freedoms. If Europe is unable to defend this most basic of freedoms it will see its civilisation disappear to be replaced by fundamentalism and totalitarianism.

Will the Commission say what measures it plans to take to defend the religious freedom of Christians in Iraq?

Answer given by Mr Patten on behalf of the Commission on October 7, 2004:

The Commission is also very concerned about the situation of the Christian communities in Iraq. It strongly condemns the attacks which were reported to have taken place on 1 August 2004 against the Christian churches in Baghdad, Mossul and Kirkuk.

These recent attacks represent a blow to the process of building a new Iraq based on pluralism, democratic principles and human rights, and in which all ethnicities and religions can enjoy full representation and equal rights. As stated in its Communication on Iraq, the Commission wishes to see the emergence of a secure, stable and prosperous Iraq, at peace with its neighbours, integrated into the international community and respectful of human rights.

The Commission is now fully engaged in the reconstruction of Iraq, with the immediate objective of improving the living conditions of the population and supporting the stabilisation of the country, including its democratisation and political stabilisation.

In this context, support in the fields of democracy, human rights – including religious freedom - governance and rule of law, represent priority areas of intervention. The Commission believes that initiatives in these specific areas represent the most relevant contribution the Community can offer to help the implementation of those principles which should enable all the different groups to live together in peace, as well as in full respect and enjoyment of their human rights.

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Appeal for a ChaldoAssyrian safe haven in northern Iraq

AINA (30.11.2004)/HRWF (06.12.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A November 25 communique entitled "Appeal for a ChaldoAssyrian Safe Haven in Iraq" has once again highlighted growing international alarm over continued attacks targeting Assyrian (also known as Chaldean and Syriac) Christians in Iraq. Signed by 11 organizations spanning several countries in Europe and North America, the Appeal notes that "The systematic and sophisticated Church bombings of August 1, October 16, and November 8 have been supplemented by nearly daily reports of abductions, beheadings, burnings, and killings of innocent ChaldoAssyrian civilians." The Appeal continues "The continuing onslaught against the vulnerable ChaldoAssyrian civilian population is perpetrated with the specific intent of terrorizing the indigenous Christian population into leaving their homes."

The Appeal lists three urgent points of action including that the Iraqi government and the international community:

- assist ChaldoAssyrians in providing security for all ChaldoAssyrian churches, institutions, towns, and villages throughout Iraq;
- establish an interim Safe Haven in the Nineveh Plain (located in the Ninveh and Duhok governerates of Northern Iraq) to be maintained and enforced by ChaldoAssyrians in order to protect and preserve the historic lands of the ChaldoAssyrian people and to serve as a sanctuary for threatened and internally displaced ChaldoAssyrians;
- implement Article 53d of the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) and establish an administrative area for ChaldoAssyrians in the Nineveh Plain.

The need for a Safe Haven has been described as an "interim" step to counter the current period of general insecurity and the specific targeting of ChaldoAssyrians throughout parts of Iraq. According to one Baghdad resident, "scarcely does a day go by that an Assyrian Christian is not killed in Baghdad for no other reason than that he is an Assyrian Christian." The net result of the ongoing attacks, the terrorizing, and the series of Church bombings has been the oft-reported mass exodus of over 40,000 ChaldoAssyrians from Iraq (story). As one proponent of a Safe Haven noted, "the intention of an interim Safe Haven is to provide those people currently contemplating selling and leaving their homes an opportunity to stay in the country in a secure area defended by ChaldoAssyrians themselves." Failing to establish such a sanctuary as soon as possible will only eliminate the option of staying in the country for tens of thousands more Assyrians.

Assyrians have repeatedly noted that Assyrians themselves will guard the Safe Haven. There is concern about outsiders enforcing such an area. For example, there is concern that Kurds may want to use the general insecurity and intimidation felt by Assyrian villagers as a pretext for extending their occupation of non-Kurdish Areas. Other Assyrian leaders remain concerned about the perception that a Safe Haven enforced by foreigners would create animosity and tension with surrounding Iraqi communities. Still other worries include the concern that any other force would not have the commitment or stamina to guard the areas as Assyrians would. "A Safe Haven enforced by ChaldoAssyrians themselves with the legal support of the Iraqi government and the international community would resolve those lingering doubts and fears."

The Appeal also calls for the implementation of Article 53d of the Iraqi government's Transitional Administrative Law (TAL, English, Arabic), which calls for an administrative region for ChaldoAssyrians within the Nineveh Plain. The inclusion of ChaldoAssyrian administrative rights in the Nineveh Plain remains the major outcome of the October 2003 Chaldean-Assyrian-Syriac Conference in Baghdad sponsored by the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) and the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO). Although the Iraqi people themselves through the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) as well as the international community through the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) endorsed ChaldoAssyrian aspirations for administrative rights in the TAL, it is widely believed that this will necessarily entail a long-term political process.

As one observer noted, "There's already talk about some Iraqi groups wanting a 6 month postponement in the election. Even if the elections proceed later, there will need to be a constitution committee deliberating such agendas." The process, then, may be long and arduous. "We definitely need to remain engaged in the process till the end. However, that long-term political process does not adequately begin to address our immediate security concerns. The Safe Haven does just that." Another analyst added "The Safe Haven and administered area are complementary -- the only difference being one of timing. We need to do something now in order to preserve some 'facts on the ground' for our future administered area. If the territory of the Nineveh Plain is not now secured, it may become a moot point in the future if current trends and our mass exodus continue. Without it, the US and its allies, along with the Iraqi government would be furthering the agenda of the Kurdish arm of Al-Qaeda, the Ansar Al-Islam."

This concern is indeed validated by the Washington Institute's 2003 Report on Ansar Al-Islam which states: "In August 2001, leaders of several Kurdish Islamist factions reportedly visited the al-Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan with the goal of creating an alternate base for the organization in northern Iraq. Their intentions were echoed in a document found in an al-Qaeda guest house in Afghanistan vowing to "expel those Jews and Christians from Kurdistan and join the way of Jihad, [and] rule every piece of land . . . with the Islamic Shari'a rule." Soon thereafter, Ansar al-Islam was created using \$300,000 to \$600,000 in al-Qaeda seed money, in addition to funds from Saudi Arabia."

The Appeal is also noteworthy because it draws support from Syriac Maronite and Coptic organizations. The joint signing of the Appeal is another in a series signs of closer cooperation amongst communities recognizing that they continue to face similar and growing pressures and circumstances in the Middle East. For Maronites, the reasons run still deeper in that there is a greater recognition that there is a shared ancestry, language, religion, and Syriac heritage as well. For Copts and non-Christian minorities as well, there is recognition that ChaldoAssyrians in Iraq represent the first of a regional test case. A direct overt manifestation of this growing understanding was the participation of hundreds of leaders and activists consisting primarily of Copts, Lebanese Christians, and ChaldoAssyrians in the Middle Eastern American Convention (MEAC) on October 1, 2004 in Washington DC (AINA, 10-07-2004).

More recently on November 19 and 20, the Coalition for the Defense of Human Rights under the leadership of Fr. Keith Roderick brought together Maronites, ChaldoAssyrians, and Mandeans for a gathering in Washington DC. At that Conference, Mr. Ashur Yousip of the Assyrian Aid Society argued for greater reconstruction aid to help develop the Nineveh Plain. Mr. Robert Dekelaita of the Assyrian Academic Society outlined the growing pressures faced by ChaldoAssyrians and the need to establish a Safe Haven in the Nineveh plain. Mr. James Rayis, a prominent Atlanta based attorney and member of the Assyrian Universal Alliance (AUA), likewise emphasized the need for security and administrative rights in the Nineveh plain. Mr. Suhaib Nashi of the Mandaean community highlighted the threats to the Mandaean community in Iraq as well. Mr. Walid Phares of the World Maronite Union spoke to the general regional pressures impacting minority communities.

As one analyst noted, "The entire region is under pressure and yet faces potentially revolutionary transformation. The first test case for greater freedoms, democracy, and pluralism begins in Iraq. If the ChaldoAssyrians who opposed Saddam's regime for decades and cooperated with the overthrow of the regime do not regain their rightful place in the Iraqi mosaic, then that does not bode well for Maronites, Copts, and all other minorities in the future Middle East." It was exactly that sentiment that prompted Mr. Michael Meunier of US Copts and Ms. Nina Shea of Freedom House to call for a concerted effort by all of the communities represented at the MEAC to focus on the ChaldoAssyrian community in Iraq as the most at risk group.

The Appeal concludes by noting that "With reports that tens of thousands of ChaldoAssyrians leaving Iraq, there now exists the real possibility of the extinction of the indigenous ChaldoAssyrian people in Iraq for the first time in their 6700 year continuous existence. The final litmus test for the Iraqi government's and the international community's genuine commitment to pluralism and democracy remains the preservation of the indigenous ChaldoAssyrian people of Iraq." The establishment of a Safe Haven patrolled by ChaldoAssyrians will add a valuable option to those unable to safeguard their families but who still yearn to remain in Iraq until a better, brighter future evolves.

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Iraqi Christians face escalating violence

Barnabas Fund (03.11.2004)/HRWF (20.10.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The Christian community in northern Iraq is facing ever mounting intimidation and violence. Since the beginning of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan (15th October) the situation has escalated, with the apparent aim of forcing the Christians out of their homeland. Tens of thousands are fleeing.

International media reported the first incident, when explosions occurred at five churches in Baghdad just after 4.00 a.m. on Saturday 16th October (2nd Ramadan). But the other threats and attacks on Christians go largely unreported. Photographs of three senior bishops in Mosul are being circulated around, with the message that they are agents of the USA, infidels, and action must be taken against them. The church leaders serving the Christian community of Karakush, Mosul, have received two letters from the Islamic militants. The first ordered them to allow Christian women to marry Muslim men (which in Muslim eyes means the women effectively convert to Islam). This, said the letter, would enable the women to be “blessed” and “purified” by their marriages.

The second letter to church leaders, received yesterday 2nd November, announced the militants’ intention of killing one person in every Christian family, as a punishment for the women not covering their heads and not going to university. This follows up pressure and threats from Islamic extremists against all women in Mosul, requiring them to cover their head with the hijab (Islamic headscarf). A Christian woman was killed around 26th October for having her head uncovered. Two other Christian women who were seen bareheaded in a market had nitric acid squirted in their faces. Specific threats about the clothing of female students at Mosul University have so frightened the Christians that an estimated 1,500 Christian women have stopped attending their classes.

Islamic militants are knocking on the doors of Christian homes in Mosul, demanding money. They argue that since the Christians do not contribute weapons and do not fight, they must make a financial donation instead. This follows exactly the model of classical Islam, whereby Christians and Jews were excluded from fighting for the Islamic state but instead required to pay a special tax – jizya – to cover the costs of their protection.

Leaflets are being distributed with the message: “Christians go; leave Iraq.” Word is being passed around in the mosques, telling Muslims not to buy anything from the Christians. Not only are they infidels, it is said, but also they will soon be leaving, so the Muslims will be able to take their homes and property for free.

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Assassinations of 88 Assyrian-Christians in 18 months

HRWF (20.10.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Since April 2003, the assassinations of at least 88 Christians were recorded by ChaldoAssyrian organizations in Iraq. The most recent victim was a little Chaldean Christian girl brutally murdered by a group of Islamic terrorists in Baghdad. The group kidnapped the child and demanded ransom money for her release, but the distraught parents were unable to pay the sum. On October the 14 the lifeless body was delivered to the parents home.

Name, date, place

- 1) Hasem Patros Dman, 10-4-2003, Kirkuk
- 2) Helda Zuhair Astefan, 19-7-2003, Mosul
- 3) Nadan Yonadm, 19-8-2003, Tikrit
- 4) Safae sabah habesh, 7-10-2003, Baghdad

- 5) Dani Eshak, 12-10-2003, Faluja
- 6) Weliam Qaiser, 12-10-2003, Faluja
- 7) Esmaeil Yuosef Sadeq, 4-11-2003, Mosul
- 8) Sargon Nato, 18-11-2004, Bassora
- 9) Bashir Toma Alias, 21-1-2004, Bassora
- 10-14) five Christian girls, 21-1-2004, near Faluja
- 15) Dr. Sarmad Sami, 25-1-2004, Bassora
- 16) Majed Bia Toma, 1-2-2004, Arbil
- 17) Haitham Sulaka Hanna, 1-2-2004, Arbil
- 18) Ekilas Qorial Yokana, 15-3-2004, Baghdad
- 19) Narmin Yonan, 15-3-2004, Baghdad
- 20) Aodisho Shamun Aodisho, 17-3-2004, Baghdad
- 21) Marta Zkaria Warda, 17-3-2004, Baghdad
- 22) Farid Aodisho Shamun, 17-3-2004, Baghdad
- 23) Zaia Audisho Shamun, 17-3-2004, Baghdad
- 24) Amijan Kona Eaziz, 17-3-2004, Baghdad
- 25) Jaudat KaKos, 17-3-2004, Baghdad
- 26) Ednan Hanna Bia Al-Shaklaui, 20-3-2003, Bassora
- 27) Rannin Raeed, 25-3-2004, Baghdad
- 28) Rafi Raeed, 25-3-2004, Baghdad
- 29) Romio Aisha Daud, 20-3-2004, Kirkuk
- 30) Emad Mika, 4-4-2004, Baquba
- 31) Wesam Yakob Asoffi, 27-4-2004, Baghdad
- 32) Samir Shlemon, 13-5-2004, Baghdad
- 33) Ashur Korial Yalda, 26-5-2004, Baghdad
- 34) Saher Farej Murdakai, 2-6-2004, Baghdad
- 35) Aisho Nissan Markos, 7-6-2004, Baghdad
- 36) Ramzia Nuia Youkana, 7-6-2004,
- 37) Duraid Sabri Hanna, 7-6-2004,
- 38) Alis Ara Maiss, 7-6-2004,
- 39) Aida Bedros Bogos, 7-6-2004,
- 40) Muna Jalal Karim, 7-6-2004,
- 41) Sami Saeed, 10-7-2004,
- 42) Rami Saeed, 10-7-2004,
- 43) Shada Sada, 20-6-2004, Bassora
- 44) Janet Sada, 20-6-2004, Bassora
- 45) Janan Jossef, 10-7-2004, Baghdad
- 46) Hanni Yuohanna Naeum, 19-7-2004, Mosul
- 47-65) 18 morti, bombe in chiese, 1-8-2004, Baghdad, Mosul
- 66) Rimon Farok Shamun, - 8-2004, Mosul
- 67) Firas Moefak hzdi petros, -8-2004, Mosul
- 68) Raed Eishoe Naem, 4-8-2004, Mosul
- 69) Takrid Abd Almasih Eshak Petros, 31-8-2004, Mosul
- 70) Hala Abd Almasih Eshak Petros, 31-8-2004, Mosul
- 71) Tara Majid Petros Alhedaia, 31-8-2004, Mosul
- 72) Nessian Sliua Shamueel, 1-9-2004, Mosul
- 73) Kaled Poles, 2-9-2004, Mosul
- 74) Hani Poles, 2-9-2004, Mosul
- 75) KorKis Yoaresh Nessian, 2-9-2004, Baghdad
- 76) Mark Luis Shito, 10-9-2004, Mosul
- 77) Bassam Sabri, 23-9-2004,
- 78) Sanne Toma, 23-9-2004, Mosul
- 79) Munir Toma, 24-9-2004,
- 80) Maradona Emanuel Nessian, 27-9-2004, Baghdad
- 81) Raeed Nessian, 27-9-2004, Baghdad
- 82) Amer Nessian, 27-9-2004, Baghdad
- 83) Amir Shabo, 27-9-2004, Baghdad
- 84) Rassm Elias Sliwa, 27-9-2004, Baghdad

- 85) Naeem Korkis, 27-9-2004, Baghdad
- 86) Emanuel Nessian Mammo, 27-9-2004, Baghdad
- 87) Majd Sako, 5-10-2004, Mosul
- 88 Little girl, 14-10-2004, Baghdad

Christian media in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East has expressed deep concern for the future of the Christian community in Iraq, calling for protection from the local authorities and an intervention by the international forces.

Source: Agenzia Fides (16.10.2004)

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Blasts rock 5 Christian churches in Iraq

By Larry Kaplow

Cox News Service (17.10.2004)/HRWF (20.10.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Predawn explosions yesterday ripped through five empty Christian churches in the Iraqi capital, which by nightfall also was the scene of the crashes of two U.S. helicopters, which killed two soldiers and wounded two others.

The church bombings occurred the day after the beginning of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Thousands of Christians have fled Iraq since the fall of the regime of Saddam Hussein. The church bombings, while claiming no casualties, appeared calculated to intimidate the remaining believers, estimated to number about 800,000.

"It was horrible," said Odet Abdul, 48, who attends one of the bombed churches and lives around the block, adding that she thought she was about to die when she heard the blast. "They want us to leave Iraq; that is the message."

The U.S. military said the causes of the helicopter crashes were not known; several copters have been shot down since November. The military's main attack helicopters, Apaches and Kiowa Warriors, are two-seat aircraft and usually fly in pairs.

The United States said the crashes occurred in southwest Baghdad about 8:30 p.m.

Christians in the capital swept up debris at the five churches, which were attacked within an hour and a half of each other starting about 4:30 a.m.

The Catholic Church of St. George was left a shell, barely standing. Large portions of the 2-foot-thick brick walls had collapsed and a fire consumed the carpets, pews, icons and plaster inside the domed building. A 2-foot-deep hole was found in the foundation directly on the doorstep, possibly where the bomb was planted.

Terrorist bombers struck five other Iraqi churches in a similar coordinated attack Aug.1 — four in Baghdad and one in Mosul — during afternoon Mass, killing at least seven.

Christian-owned liquor stores and DVD stores have been attacked by fanatical Muslims who oppose the sale of such merchandise.

Nabil Jameel Suleiman, 40, a member of the St. George church, said he and his children were sleeping in an adjoining building when the blast occurred. They were not injured.

He said he planned to clean up the ashes and debris around the battered marble altar so the priest could celebrate Mass there today.

"Just to clarify that we will continue to do the Mass in the church and nothing will affect us," he said. "All Iraqis are threatened, when you go to work, go to school."

No group took responsibility for the attacks, which were condemned by the Association of Muslim Scholars, a Sunni clerical group believed to have ties to some insurgents, the Associated Press reported.

"Islam doesn't support the ongoing terrorism," Sheik Abdul Sattar Abdul-Jabbar of the association told the AP.

The U.S. Marines' ground and air attacks on the insurgent-controlled city of Fallujah briefly eased yesterday. Leaders in Fallujah said they wanted to resume negotiations with the Iraqi government and the Marines. But as night fell, U.S. forces resumed an attack on a suspected militant target.

The heads of Fallujah tribes and other city leaders had halted negotiations last week after Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi demanded that they turn over Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab Zarqawi, believed to be in Fallujah.

The Fallujah delegation said it cannot control or capture him any more easily than the Americans could do so. The Fallujah leadership, while supporting the local Iraqi resistance, has tried to distance itself publicly from Zarqawi.

Fallujah negotiator Khaled Fakhri al-Jumeili told reporters that "we are ready to return to the negotiating table" if U.S. air strikes are stopped, the AP reported.

U.S. and Iraqi leaders vow to recapture Fallujah and other Iraqi cities before holding national parliamentary elections in January.

American officials had predicted an increase in attacks with the start of Ramadan on Friday. The interim Iraqi government and the U.S.-led coalition have withstood a wave of attacks for more than two months; at least 50 car bombings have occurred since early September.

During the past few days:

- Two blasts inside the green zone headquarters of the U.S. and Iraqi leadership Thursday killed at least five persons.
- A mortar strike near a Baghdad hospital early Thursday killed one Iraqi.
- A car-bomb attack at a police station in southern Baghdad killed 10 Friday.
- A car bombing Friday killed three U.S. troops and an Iraqi translator in Qaim, a town near the Syrian border primarily patrolled by Marines.

- The U.S. Army announced that another car bomb, near the northern city of Mosul, killed a soldier.
- The U.S. military yesterday announced the deaths of four other soldiers in two car bombings Friday.

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Testimony of Dr. Paul Marshall before the House International Relations Committee Hearings on the U.S. State Department 2004 Religious Freedom Report

Zinda (06.10.2004)/HRWF (18.10.2004) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom to testify at today's hearings on the State Department's Country Report on Religious Freedom.

At the outset, I wish to express our deep appreciation for these important hearings, and for your dedication to ensuring that religious freedom concerns remain a force in U.S. foreign policy.

Such oversight is vitally important both in mobilizing appropriate foreign policy tools by American policy makers, and in sending a powerful message to governments throughout the world that the American people are not indifferent to violations of religious freedom wherever they may occur. The State Department Report constitutes the most detailed religious freedom compilation in the world.

This year's report reflects a monumental effort on the part of the Office of Religious Freedom. They and all the American Foreign Service officers throughout the world who contributed to it deserve to be commended. We will make critical comments about the Reports, but this should not obscure the fact that they are an important contribution to the field of human rights.

One criticism of the Report is that it at times soft pedals criticism of U.S. allies or of countries in sensitive situations. Indeed, on February 18 of this year, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit found that the State Department reports were "sometimes skewed toward the governing administration's foreign policy goals and concerns." I share this criticism but believe that such skewing is diminishing. One way this shows is in the designation of Saudi Arabia as a country of particular concern. Another is in its more critical view of the situation of Coptic Christians in Egypt.

However, we are concerned that Turkmenistan has not been designated a "country of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act.

Perhaps the most frequently cited problem with the Reports is that their findings do not always correspond to American policy action.

While there are various underlying explanations, part of the problem is attributable to the Reports themselves. Many of the Reports contain an overwhelming and unselective compilation of facts and information without reaching definitive conclusions, or conveying a sense of priority.

Fundamental human rights problems are obscured in a welter of detail. Severe violators may be hidden in an avalanche of information. For example, the report on Germany is as long as the report on Sudan, and longer than the one on Eritrea.

There is a need to give real focus and priority designation in a report of this magnitude and type. Prioritizing who are the worst violators, and, within each country report section, which are the most fundamental human rights problems, is important to ensuring that appropriate focus and concerted attention is given by the U.S. State Department, Congress and, as well as non-governmental human rights groups.

The 1998 International Religious Freedom Act's requirement that the Administration not only to produce an annual report, but also to designate egregious religious persecutors as "countries of particular concern" goes some way to filling this gap. Such a designation also triggers under the Act a Presidential announcement within 90 days of what policies the Administration will adopt to improve religious freedom in the countries in question. The shortcoming of this mechanism is that the designation has not led to any additional sanctions.

Iraq

For understandable reasons the Report does not deal with Iraq, but I believe that it is vital to address the situation of the religious minorities there. Of course, many Iraqis irrespective of religion have been attacked and threatened by terrorists and everyone's security needs to be assured.

However, the especially vulnerable Christian minority has been targeted for their faith. Consequently, we are particularly concerned about the current situation of the ChaldoAssyrian community in Iraq. The Iraqi government and the media report that a mass exodus of ChaldoAssyrians, the native Christians from Iraq, is now underway due to targeted religious violence against them.

Beheadings, kidnappings, and assassinations have been documented in recent months, including in September when six ChaldoAssyrian workers were murdered in Baghdad for "collaborating" with the United States. According to reports of the Catholic relief group, Aid to the Church in Need, over the past 18 months, more than 80 Christians have been killed at the hands of Muslim terrorists and extremists, 20 of which murders occurred last month.

In September in Mosul, terrorists kidnapped and beheaded a 30-year-old Chaldean Christian, a manager of a small gift shop – the third recent beheading of members of this community. In the last month, Christian homes in the small village of Bakhdeda between Kirkuk and Mosul suffered two mortar attacks that killed and injured children sleeping in their beds. On August 1, Islamic extremists bombed five churches in Mosul and Baghdad during Sunday worship services.

In the face of such savagery, according to Iraqi government records, 40,000 ChaldoAssyrians have fled over the past two months, especially in the immediate aftermath of the August church bombings. This pattern is reminiscent of the bombing of synagogues in 1948 that eventually led to the flight of virtually the entire Iraqi Jewish community.

An estimated 800,000 ChaldoAssyrian remain in Iraq and constitute the country's largest non-Muslim minority. They form one of the nation's most moderate and educated communities. The "ethnic-cleansing" in Iraq of its Christians would diminish the country's prospects of developing as a tolerant, pluralistic and democratic society.

Without a sizeable non-Muslim minority, moderate Muslims may encounter far greater intimidation in raising their voices against the imposition of the strict Islamic law favored by some prominent Islamic parties and clerics. We urge congress to ensure that the following specific measures are taken on behalf of the ChaldoAssyrians of Iraq:

1. Establish as a safe haven for them, the administrative unit included in the Transitional Administrative Law (Article 53D). This safe haven should include the chiefly traditional community villages located near Mosul, in the Nineveh Plains.

2. Provide the ChaldoAssyrians in Iraq with direct and expedited support from the Congressionally-authorized funds for Iraq's development in order that they may rebuild their destroyed villages, roads, schools, and clinics as well as undertake start-up economic development projects. The community has been shut out of funding due to discriminatory practices that favor Muslim and Kurd groups, as well as due to general bureaucratic delays.

3. Allocate funds for the resettlement of Christian refugees. Many educated and professional young people of the ChaldoAssyrian community, in particular, have fled the country over the past year and are now living in legal limbo in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Greece and elsewhere in the Middle East.

4. Facilitate the ability of those forced to flee by the Hussein regime, or exiled in recent months, to register to vote if they are eligible.

5. Provide across the board political support against the active and passive ethnic cleansing to which they are being subjected throughout Iraq because they are Christians and because they resist complying with official demands to register with state and local governments as Kurds or Arabs.

The next few months will be critical ones as the Iraqi people undertake a census, elections and constitution writing. If the ChaldoAssyrians are now treated, as they often have by the great powers of the past, as one more inconvenient minority in the Middle East who must be sacrificed to the greater good of mollifying Arab, Kurd and Muslim sentiment, the United States will have presided over the demise of one of Iraq's, indeed the world's, most ancient religious groups and peoples. We will also have undercut our goal of reconstructing a more tolerant, democratic government in Iraq.

Closing

In conclusion Mr. Chairman, we would like to thank you holding these important hearing and for this opportunity to appear before you.

(*) Dr. Paul Marshall is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Religious Freedom, Freedom House. The following is an excerpt related to Iraq from his testimony delivered on 6 October 2004].

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Christians talk of leaving Iraq after church bombs

Reuters (17.10.2004)/HRWF (18.10.2004) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Explosions that damaged five churches in Baghdad have prompted some Christians to wonder whether it's time to leave their ancient homeland.

"If they don't want us in Iraq, let them say it and we will leave," said Samir Hermiz, 40, standing next to a church that was reduced to ashes. "I'm really thinking of leaving Iraq." The series of explosions caused no casualties but they further unnerved Christians already shaken by coordinated church bombings that killed 11 people in Baghdad and the northern city of Mosul in August.

There was no immediate word on the identity or motives of the assailants who struck five churches, including a Roman Catholic church in Karrada that was gutted in the attack.

Iraq's Christians had little power under Saddam Hussein's rule but they did not feel threatened by sectarian violence.

Now Christians feel they have no protection in a country where the interim government is struggling to quell the bloody chaos of suicide bombings, shootings and kidnappings.

Like others in his community, store keeper Nabil Khawam believes "Christians are the true Iraqis", but he fears they can no longer risk staying.

"We are a minority and we have no power. We are peaceful people. If attacks continue our numbers will decline," he said.

"They are infidels...infidels... They have no faith," Kamil Shabo, a 40-year-old labourer, said of the bombers.

"It is a religious sanctuary, how could they attack a religious place?" If he gets the chance to work abroad, Shabo said he will leave Iraq and never return.

After independence in 1932, the Iraqi military massacred Assyrian Christians in villages around Mosul for what was seen as their collaboration with former colonial power Britain.

Some Christians, like former Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz, a Chaldean, rose to prominence under Saddam.

After the latest bombings, Christians fear they may no longer be welcome in the land they believe their ancestors inhabited for about 2,000 years.

Housewife Khamina Nanno, 24, was always proud of her faith, studied the Bible every Friday at the now-ruined Catholic church in Karrada, as well as attending weekly mass.

"They want to create a sectarian war and unrest between Islam and Christianity," she said, wiping away tears as she surveyed the destruction.

"I will come tomorrow for the mass. I don't care if I die. At least I will die in a place of worship and go to Paradise."

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Assyrian boy beheaded, burned in North Iraq

Bahzani.net & Ankawa.com (06.10.2004)/HRWF (18.10.2004) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - On October 5 the Christian residents of Ba'asheeqa and Bahzani, near Mosul in north Iraq, were shocked when they discovered the body of Fadi Shamoan. The 'Aaid Khidir Shamoan family was devastated as they witnessed the body of their 15-years-old son, who was found burned after he was beheaded.

Fadi was kidnapped while he was riding his bike, which his father had given to him as a present, in the 'Ain 'alaq orchards in Ba'asheeqa around 12:00 noon.

His body was treated in the most barbaric way; he was mutilated, burned, and thrown in the Ba'asheeqa-Teez Kharab road in front of al-'Azzawi ranch.

Earlier, Ba'asheeqa mourned another victim, Julian Afram Yacoub, aged 14, when he was hit in the head with a concrete block and then burned.

The murderers have been targeting innocent children, which are forcing many Christians and Yezidis to flee their homes and villages.

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Life is a nightmare for Christians in Mosul

Vatican News (date missing)/HRWF (18.10.2004) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - "The situation is serious. Christians live in constant fear of being attacked, kidnapped, and killed by radical Islamic groups of terrorists. Once Mosul was a quiet town; now life is impossible," an Iraqi Catholic nun--who asked not to be named for the safety of the community--told Fides, Vatican's official news agency.

"Armed groups of Islamic fundamentalists break into homes of Christians to kill and steal. This is also because we know that in some mosques Imam teach that it is not a crime to kill a Christian," the frightened nun told Fides.

The nun speaks out of personal experience. "This is a manhunt for Christians, and life is a nightmare. Not long ago one of my relations was taken hostage and kept tied up and blindfolded for 5 days without food. They tortured him to convince him to convert to Islam. He refused, and eventually the family paid ransom money, and he was released. But many other less fortunate people who were kidnapped were killed."

"All our families feel threatened. The situation is chaotic and Christians are an easy target because they do not react with violence, they are unarmed. Our families are too afraid to send children to school and the women hardly ever leave the house. One of our Chaldean priests was threatened and forced to move away because he held a funeral for a Christian youth who was killed. In fact many Christians are leaving for Syria, Jordan or the Kurdish region of northern Iraq."

"There is total anarchy in the absence of police and civil authorities. Many fundamentalists are known to all but no one does anything. Our peaceful Muslim neighbours can do nothing. All we can do is pray."

In 2003 Fides reported several episodes of Islamic fundamentalist pressure on Christians in Mosul. A year ago, after months of threats, the Chaldean Catholic bishop's residence in Mosul was attacked by a group of armed men. The bishop had received many letters threatening Christians with death if they did not convert to Islam. After the attack Christian religious leaders appealed to all the people of Mosul to isolate the extremists.

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Distribution of European aid to Iraq

MEP Albert Jan Maat asks European Commission on guarantees for fair distribution of aid

HRWF Int. (11.10.2004) - Website: www.hrwf.net - Email: info@hrwf.net - In May 2004, few weeks before the elections for the new European Parliament (2004-2009), MEP Albert Jan Maat (The Netherlands, EEP-ED) addressed a written question to the European Commission expressing his concern with the fair distribution of aid to Iraq. He highlighted in particular his concern with the exclusion of ChaldoAssyrians in the process. The written reply by the European Commission was publicized on September 28.

Question posed by Albert Jan Maat (PPE-DE) to the European Commission E-1530/04

The Commission has decided that 160 million EUR can be devoted to the reconstruction of Iraq. What guarantees can the Commission give that religious minorities can benefit from these funds on the basis of proportionality?

Is the Commission aware that Assyrian Christians are systematically excluded in the distribution of aid by local leaders?

***Answer by Mr Patten on behalf of the European Commission
E-1530/04 NL (28 September 2004)***

In 2004, 160 million EUR were allocated by the European Commission for the reconstruction of Iraq. The fund is channelled through the international financing mechanism for reconstruction of Iraq (International Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq - IRFFI). This financing mechanism consists of two multi-donor trust funds – one under the authority of the UN Development Programme and another one under the authority of the World Bank. The Commission allocates 80 million EUR to each of them. Both trust funds have a common management structure; any project approved for financing fits into the assistance programme of the UN or the World Bank for 2004 and is validated by the Iraqi authorities. The implementation provisions are decided by the UN and the World Bank; the Commission is not directly involved in that process.

The Commission's point of view is that only identified needs must be taken into consideration for decisions concerning financing and that political, ethnic or religious consideration may not play any role in this process. Via the IRFFI donor committee, the UN and the World Bank, the Commission does everything to make sure that there is not any form of discrimination in the activities supported by the international community.

The commission is not aware of any practice that is systematically discriminatory towards Assyrian Christians concerning the distribution of humanitarian assistance by local leaders.

*The question and the reply are published in Dutch
Translation by Human Rights Without Frontiers*

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Celebrating feast, Iraq's Yezidis fear for future

by Seb Walker

Reuters (17.08.2004) / HRWF Int. (24.08.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -- Worshippers sacrifice fowl and offer dawn prayers to the angel Malak Taus as hundreds of members Iraq's obscure Yezidi sect gather at their Lalish temple to celebrate the summer feast.

Families walk barefoot through the streets of Sheikh Adi -- a Yezidi religious site about 280 miles north of Baghdad -- paying their respects at numerous shrines and tying knots in holy cloth hung in the temple to ensure male offspring.

Yezidis are one of Iraq's oldest and most unusual religious sects and this festival -- the biggest of their year -- usually attracts around 15,000 people in August, with some families traveling from abroad to make the pilgrimage.

This year things are different. Even before car bombs exploded outside five Christian churches in Iraq this month -- raising fears of attacks on religious minorities -- the Yezidi

political leader, or "prince," had ordered official celebrations to be canceled because of security concerns.

This year, the pilgrims numbered in the hundreds, rather than thousands. "I didn't even expect this many people to come," said Sheikh Tassim, the 71-year-old prince, as he received well-wishers in one of the temple's halls.

The Yezidis are a Kurdish religious community who number around 750,000 in Iraq and about 1.5 million worldwide, according to Tassim, with members found in places including Syria, Turkey and Russia.

Tassim, who was forced to flee Iraq after supporting a Kurdish uprising and spent several years in exile in London in the 1970s, said Yezidis were potential targets for militants.

"We have the same problem as everybody else in Iraq -- terrorism," he said. "It's very upsetting that any religious place would be exposed to bomb attacks."

Fallen angel

Yezidi beliefs are a confusing mix of Islamic and even Zoroastrian elements, but in Iraq they have gained a reputation as "devil-worshippers" since they revere all of God's angels -- including the "fallen angel" known in some faiths as Satan.

According to Yezidis, "Malak Taus" was God's favorite angel, brought to Earth as a prophet of peace -- but this belief and some unusual customs have provoked mistrust from others.

In fact, many Yezidis believe they are more likely than most to face persecution in Iraq -- because they belong to the Kurdish minority and because of their religion.

"In this country we feel we are always discriminated against twice ... but our traditions will stay," said Sheikh al-Yass Oudi, a distant relative of Sheikh Adi, the faith's historic founder.

Yezidis have no religious marriage ceremony -- the tradition is to kidnap one's intended bride from her family's house and hold her for a year before making a dowry arrangement.

It is also customary for Yezidis not to cut their mustaches, and to avoid eating lettuce or wearing blue.

"We don't like to mix with Arab people -- they consider us unclean because they are uneducated," said Oudi.

Hundreds of Yezidi villages were destroyed during former president Saddam Hussein's campaigns against Iraqi Kurds, and although Yezidis now count one of their number as a minister of state in Baghdad, there is concern among the community that they are being marginalized in postwar Iraq.

"Yezidi families are still living in tents in my district and the government has given us no help," said Qasim Shursha, a Yezidi local government representative in Sinjar, which lies between the northern city of Mosul and the Syrian border.

Shursha said the area contained many Yezidis before Saddam forced them out during the late 1980s -- those who have returned are now facing discrimination by Arabs.

"Nobody is attacking us yet -- but Arabs are trying to remove Yezidi members from the police force."

Shrinking population

Most of the families attending this year's toned-down summer festival seemed unworried by the threat of the attacks.

But as they ate picnics in the hills around their temple -- many wearing colorful traditional robes -- some Yezidis admitted to fears for the community's survival.

"We don't worry about those terrorists," said 32-year-old English teacher Sabah Haji. "But our population is getting smaller since we can't marry outside our religion and we don't accept people to enter Yezidism."

Haji said there was a debate among Iraqi Yezidis about whether to relax traditions to stop the community shrinking and ensure it does not become isolated from modern society.

For Haji, upholding the traditions of the "most ancient religion on earth" was paramount, even if they jeopardize the community's existence.

"If God wants us to disappear we will disappear," he said.

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40,000 Christians leave Iraq in wake of attacks

Zenit.org (16.08.2004) / HRWF Int. (24.08.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -- Some 40,000 Christians have left Iraq in the wake of recent attacks on churches in the country, says a government official.

In statements Sunday to the Arabic newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat, the minister for displacement and migration, Pascale Icho Warda, said that the emigration "is due to the insecurity and the attacks on churches in Baghdad and Mosul two weeks ago."

Four attacks on Christian places of worship in Baghdad and two in Mosul left at least 10 dead and 50 wounded at the beginning of August.

On Aug. 2, John Paul II sent a message to Archbishop Emmanuel III Delly, patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans and president of the assembly of the Catholic bishops of Iraq, to express his sympathy.

"At this time of trial I am spiritually close to the Iraqi Church and society, and I renew the expression of my heartfelt solidarity to the pastors and faithful," the papal telegram said.

John Paul II assured Iraqi Christians of his prayer and "constant commitment" so that "a climate of peace and reconciliation will be established in the beloved country as soon as possible."

Christians comprise about 700,000 of Iraq's 24 million inhabitants.

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The Chaldo-Assyrian cause in Iraq: implications for Maronites

John C. Michael, MD
Assyrian Academic Society

Presented at the National Apostolate of Maronites Convention, Orlando, Florida (July 16, 2004)

AINA (03.08.2004) / HRWF Int. (05.08.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -- The ChaldoAssyrians (also known as Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Syriacs) are the indigenous people of Mesopotamia and have a history spanning over 6700 years. Today's ChaldoAssyrians are the descendants of the ancient multiethnic Assyrian empire and one of the earliest civilizations emerging in Mesopotamia. Although the Assyrian empire ended in 612 B.C., history is replete with recorded details of the continuous persistence of the ChaldoAssyrian people till the present time. Assyrian civilization at one time incorporated the entire Near East most notably the area of the Fertile Crescent.

The heartland of Assyria lays in present day northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, southeastern Turkey, and northwestern Iran. The remains of the ancient capital of Assyria, Nineveh, lie next to Mosul in northern Iraq. Until earlier this century prior to the ChaldoAssyrian Holocaust of 1915, the major ChaldoAssyrian communities still inhabited the areas of Tur Abdin and Hakkari in southeastern Turkey, Jazira in northeastern Syria, Urmi in northwestern Iran, and Mosul in northern Iraq as they had for thousands of years.

The world's 4.5 million ChaldoAssyrians are currently dispersed with members of the Diaspora comprising nearly one-third of the population. Most of the ChaldoAssyrians in the Diaspora live in North America, Europe and Australia with nearly 400,000 residing in the United States of America and 200,000 in Europe. The remaining ChaldoAssyrians reside primarily in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon and to a lesser extent in Iran, and Turkey.

ChaldoAssyrians constitute the third largest ethnic group in Iraq. They represent the historically indigenous people of the region. Estimates of the total ChaldoAssyrian population in Iraq range between 1.5-2 million people. Most ChaldoAssyrians currently in Iraq reside in and around the Baghdad area with 750,000- 1,000,000 ChaldoAssyrians within central Iraq. An additional 300,000-400,000 ChaldoAssyrian reside within the area in and around Mosul (ancient Nineveh). Approximately 100,000 ChaldoAssyrians reside in the former northern UN Safe Haven. Another community of ChaldoAssyrians numbering in the range of 25,000 resides in Karkuk while the remainder of the population is scattered in smaller concentrations in the remainder of the country. Due to disproportionate emigration, ChaldoAssyrians from Iraq constitute the largest group of Iraqis in the U.S. with estimates ranging between 80-90%.

ChaldoAssyrians are not Arabs but rather have maintained a continuous and separate ethnic identity, language, culture, and religion that predate the Arabization of the Near East. Until today, the ChaldoAssyrians speak a distinct language (called Syriac or Aramaic by some scholars), the language spoken by Jesus Christ. As a Semitic language, the ChaldoAssyrian language is related to Hebrew and Arabic but predates both. The Syriac or Aramaic language of the ChaldoAssyrians remains the oldest continuously written and spoken language of the entire Middle East.

The ChaldoAssyrians were among the first people to accept Christianity in the first century A.D. through the Apostle St. Thomas. Despite the subsequent Islamic conquest of the region in the seventh century A.D., the various ChaldoAssyrian Churches flourished and their adherents at one time numbered in the tens of millions. ChaldoAssyrian missionary zeal was unmatched and led to the first Christian missions to China, Japan, and the Philippines. The Church of the East stele in Xian, China bears testament to a thriving Church of the East as early as in the seventh century A.D.

Early on, ChaldoAssyrian Christians developed into two ancient branches, the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Church of the East. Over time, divisions within Eastern Christianity led to the establishment of various Syriac Churches including the Chaldean Church, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic Churches, the Syriac Maronite Church, and the Melkite Churches. Persistent persecution under Islamic occupation led to the migration of still greater numbers of Assyrian Christians into the Christian autonomous areas of Mount Lebanon as well. With the arrival of Western Protestant

missionaries into Mesopotamia, especially since the nineteenth century, several smaller congregations of Assyrian Protestants arose as well. Over the course of several centuries, some ChaldoAssyrians came to identify themselves by these varying but closely related names.

Despite some differing self-identifications, ChaldoAssyrians still overwhelmingly consider themselves one people irrespective of whether they refer to themselves as Assyrians, Chaldeans, or Syrians. In the 2000 U.S. Census, mainstream organizations from the different communities including the Assyrian Universal Alliance (AUA), the Assyrian American National Federation (AANF), the Chaldean Federation of America (CFA), and the Syriac Universal Alliance (SUA) endorsed the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriac category that tabulated all respondents as one people independent of their preferred term of self-identification. Letters from the Bishops of the Chaldean, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, and Syriac Maronite Churches encouraged their parishioners to support the unified category in order that all segments of the community are tabulated together.

A direct consequence of ChaldoAssyrian adherence to the Christian faith and their missionary enterprise has been persecution, massacres, and ethnic cleansing by various waves of non-Christian neighbors which ultimately led to a decimation of the ChaldoAssyrian Christian population. Quite tragically, Great Britain invited the ChaldoAssyrians as an ally in World War One. The autonomous ChaldoAssyrians were drawn into the conflict following successive massacres against the civilian population by forces of the Ottoman Empire consisting of Turks and Kurds. Although many geopolitical and economic factors were involved in provoking the attacks against the ChaldoAssyrians, a jihad or "holy war" was declared and served as the rallying cry and vehicle for marauding Turks, Kurds, and Persians. Although the Muslim holy war against the Armenians is perhaps better known, over three-fourths, or 750,000 ChaldoAssyrian Christians died by outright murder, starvation, disease and the all too familiar consequences of genocide between 1914-1923 during the ChaldoAssyrian Holocaust along with a significant number of Pontic Greeks.

The conflict and subsequent ChaldoAssyrian Holocaust led to the decimation and dispersal of the ChaldoAssyrians. Those ChaldoAssyrians who survived the Holocaust were driven out of their ancestral homeland in Turkish Mesopotamia primarily toward the area of Mosul Vilayet in Iraq, Jazira in Syria, and the Urmi plains of Iran where large ChaldoAssyrian populations already lived. The massacres of 1915 followed the ChaldoAssyrians to these areas as well, prompting an exodus of many more ChaldoAssyrians to other countries and continents.

The ChaldoAssyrian Holocaust of 1915 is the turning point in the modern history of the ChaldoAssyrian Christians precisely because it is the single event that led to the dispersal of the surviving community into small, weak, and destitute pockets. Most ChaldoAssyrians in the Diaspora today can trace their emigration from the Middle East to the ChaldoAssyrian Holocaust of 1915. Many who fled from their original homes into other Middle Eastern countries subsequently, just one generation later, once more emigrated to the West. Thus, many ChaldoAssyrian families in the West today have experienced transfer to a new country for three successive generations-beginning, for instance, from Turkey to Iraq and then to the United States.

On account of the ChaldoAssyrians siding with the victorious Allies during World War One, Great Britain had promised the ChaldoAssyrians autonomy, independence, and a homeland. The ChaldoAssyrian question was addressed during postwar deliberations at the League of Nations. However, with the termination of the British Mandate in Iraq, the unresolved status of the ChaldoAssyrians was relinquished to the Iraqi government with certain minority guarantees specifically concerning freedom of religious, cultural, and linguistic expression.

Many of the ChaldoAssyrians surviving the Holocaust had been gathered in refugee camps in Iraq pending final resettlement in an autonomous ChaldoAssyrian homeland. In 1933, however, the Iraqi government declared an ultimatum giving the ChaldoAssyrians one of two choices: either to be resettled in small populations dispersed amongst larger Muslim

populations that had recently been violently antagonistic or to leave Iraq entirely. Some ChaldoAssyrians chose to leave to neighboring Syria and so notified the Iraqi government of their intention. In response, the Iraqi government dispatched the Iraqi army to attack the ChaldoAssyrians fleeing into Syria. In their subsequent defeat, the retreating Iraqi army massacred over 3,000 ChaldoAssyrian civilians in Simele and other surrounding towns in northern Iraq in August of 1933. Upon his return to Baghdad, the commanding officer ordering the massacre was hailed as a conquering hero. Thus, the first official military campaign of the Iraqi army served as the newly independent government's final solution to the ChaldoAssyrian question. The demoralized ChaldoAssyrian refugee population in Iraq was thereby resettled in dispersed villages while the other surviving isolated communities languished in the areas of Tur Abdin, Turkey; Jazira, Syria; and Urmi, Iran. The lessons of World War I remain fresh in the ChaldoAssyrian psyche. On the one hand, deep apprehension about the peaceful intentions of our neighbors is coupled with profound suspicion about the reliability and commitment of Western powers.

The Baathist government of Iraq was not any more sympathetic to ChaldoAssyrians. Under Saddam Hussein, over 200 ChaldoAssyrian villages were razed in northern Iraq in order to resettle ChaldoAssyrians into urban areas such as Baghdad in a bid to better assimilate and "Arabize" the population. ChaldoAssyrians were denied recognition as an ethnic minority and instead categorized as Christian Arabs. The Iraqi state routinely interfered in Church matters. Eventually, one Assyrian Patriarch (of the Assyrian Church of the East) left Iraq under intense pressure and settled near Chicago, thereby moving the Holy See outside of Mesopotamia for the first time in nearly 2000 years. Under the Baathist regime, Koranic instruction was also introduced into school curricula. In 1984, dozens of ChaldoAssyrian activists were imprisoned and three leaders of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) were hanged in an attempt to squelch a burgeoning ChaldoAssyrian awareness.

Following the first Gulf War, the ChaldoAssyrian experience in the Kurdish occupied Northern provinces or UN administered "Safe Haven," was not significantly better. In the Northern provinces, Kurdish tribal and feudal groups occupied ChaldoAssyrian areas and expropriated over 50 villages in whole or in part. Overly proactive ChaldoAssyrian leaders were assassinated as in the example of Francis Shabo, a ChaldoAssyrian Member of Parliament in the Kurdish Parliament of northern Iraq from the ADM who had been assigned the task of adjudicating land disputes between ChaldoAssyrians and Kurds. According to Amnesty International, Mr. Shabo was killed by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) headed by Mazsoud Barzani. Similar to their Baathists neighbors, the Kurds denied ChaldoAssyrians their ethnicity and referred to them as Christian Kurds.

Within the northern area, however, the ChaldoAssyrians were able to establish political parties, who, as long as they did not threaten Kurdish occupation of the Northern provinces, were able to operate schools, and, to a limited extent, administer some reconstruction and humanitarian aid projects. Also, during that time, the ADM was able to transform from an underground clandestine political organization into a legitimate political party free of direct Iraqi government threat although the threat from the KDP remained. Through the assistance of other affiliated political organizations in the US known as the Assyrian Coalition, as well as through the direct lobbying efforts of the Assyrian American League (AAL); the ADM gained legitimacy in Washington DC as the official representative of the ChaldoAssyrian people in Iraq. In the lead up to the second Gulf War, the ADM was included in opposition meetings consisting of the eight major opposition groups and was included by the US government in the Iraqi Liberation Act. Mr. Yonadam Kanna, the Secretary General of the ADM, was included as the sole ChaldoAssyrian member of the 25 member Iraqi Governing Council.

In a historic first, the ADM along with the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO) on October 22-24, 2003 cosponsored a conference referred to as the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian General Conference in Baghdad to declare the political aspirations of the ChaldoAssyrian people of Iraq. Among the diverse list of attendees was Dr. Imad Chamoun as the representative to Maronite Patriarch Sfeir. The conference affirmed that the various names of Chaldean, Syriac, and Assyrian refer to one people. "Due to the pressing

need imposed by the critical situation that our people and cause are going through, the Conference highlights the importance of concurrence on one unified national appellation." The Conference attendees "agreed on appellation of 'ChaldoAssyrian' to designate our people and the appellation of 'Syriac' to designate our language and culture to be incorporated into the Constitution."

Furthermore, on a political level, the Baghdad Conference "stressed the need to designate an administrative region for our people in the Nineveh Plain with participation of other ethnic and religious groups, where a special law will be established for self-administration and the assurance of administrative, political, cultural rights in towns and villages throughout Iraq where our people reside." Referring to past policies of resettlement and destruction of villages, the Conference also stressed the redress of such policies that "altered the demographic structure of several regions that belonged to our people. 1957 Census and earlier should be used as benchmarks." The conference also demanded the right of return for Iraqi ChaldoAssyrians.

From October to March, ChaldoAssyrians mobilized to meet the challenge of incorporating their political platform into the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) -- the presumed precursor of the future Iraqi Constitution. The final version of the TAL left ChaldoAssyrians both hopeful and apprehensive. On the one hand, the TAL was an historic first in the modern history of Iraq since ChaldoAssyrians were recognized as an ethnic minority as an integral part of the Iraqi mosaic including among others Arabs, Kurds, and Turkman. Notably, they were recognized as one people with the combined name declared by the Baghdad Conference. Also, in line with the Baghdad platform, the TAL stated in Article 53, paragraph D "This law shall guarantee the administrative, cultural, and political rights of the Turcomans, ChaldoAssyrians, and all other citizens." The TAL also established the legitimacy of the Iraqi Property Claims Commission which may potentially allow the resettlement of ChaldoAssyrians as well as other displaced people to their original homes and villages.

The TAL, however, left some cause for concern as well. First, the reference to ChaldoAssyrian rights was vague and did not specify a territory -- namely, the Nineveh Plain. Secondly, the TAL acknowledged the KRG's effective control and occupation of the three northern provinces of Arbil, Dohuk, and Sulmaniyah including additional areas in Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Diyala provinces. Dohuk, Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Arbil provinces include many ChaldoAssyrian towns and villages with Nineveh and Dohuk including the bulk of the Assyrian heartland. Especially, troubling in the context of rising Islamic fundamentalism was the TAL's recognition of Islam as "the official religion of the State and is to be considered a source of legislation."

Moreover, "No law that contradicts the universally agreed tenets of Islam, the principles of democracy, or the rights cited in Chapter two of the Law may be enacted during the transitional period. This law respects the Islamic identity of the majority of the Iraqi people and guarantees the full religious rights of all individuals to freedom of religious belief and practice."

With the handover of sovereignty in June, the US sponsored UN resolution 1546 recognizing the legitimacy of the interim Iraqi government did not include the TAL. However, it is believed that much of the TAL will remain an important starting point for the upcoming constitution following general elections.

In summary, ChaldoAssyrians would like to see a democratic and secular Iraq with proper recognition of Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs as a unified indigenous people of Iraq. ChaldoAssyrians aspire to have the same political rights as other constituent groups at a minimum, such that autonomy granted to some groups should be afforded ChaldoAssyrians within the Nineveh Plain as well. There must be a proper accounting of ChaldoAssyrians both within and without Iraq coupled with a genuine right of return. There must be equitable allocation of the nation's resources and reconstruction aid to allow necessary infrastructure aid to allow infrastructure development and rehabilitation of destroyed

villages.

Moving forward, the remaining challenges include formulating an Iraqi constitution that preserves the gains of the TAL -- namely recognition of ChaldoAssyrians as a people -- while specifying the rights and geography of the ChaldoAssyrian self-administered area. Serious problems that remain include rising Islamic fundamentalism, growing Kurdish hegemony, concern over increasing emigration, fair and equitable appropriation of reconstruction and development aid to ChaldoAssyrian areas, internal sectarian and name-based tensions, and, American/Western resistance to helping ChaldoAssyrian Christians out of concern over an Islamist backlash.

Now, why is the ChaldoAssyrian cause important to Lebanese Christians in general and Maronites in particular? Change is coming to the entire Middle East and the first stage of that change has begun in Iraq. Successes and failures of minorities i.e. ChaldoAssyrians in Iraq will have profound reverberations throughout our communities in the Middle East, especially in Lebanon and Syria. The federal model of democracy with emphasis on a self-administered area is the only model that can help ensure the cultural survival of the various communities of Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs in the Middle East. In Iraq, the emphasis on the Nineveh Plains where our villages and towns still remain must be internationally sanctioned by law in order to allow the language, religion, culture, and geography to survive intact.

Maronites and Lebanese Christians as a whole face similar challenges that ChaldoAssyrians are now experiencing. We all are concerned with Islamic fundamentalism, demographic and political hegemony (albeit from different groups), the need for fair and equitable economic development and reconstruction, internal sectarian tensions (even within Christians groups), and a growing realization that the "Christian" West has been reluctant to advocate on our behalf out of fear of alienating the regional Muslim majority. Finally, we all face the prospects of increasing emigration from our homelands and a potentially overwhelming challenge to register and count all of our people in the diaspora.

We share a common history, culture, religion, Syriac language, and, at one time, a contiguous geography. But most importantly, we share an intimately tied future fate. When we ignore the dire situation of one of our communities in the region, we diminish from our own interest and magnitude as a people. We must now begin to present ourselves to the world as a people with a regional, international problem rather than as isolated groups with internal domestic problems.

Though many of us believe we are indeed one people, we must not delude ourselves that this has been universally adopted by all of our people. However, from a simply strategic and tactical perspective, we cannot allow the beatings and disappearances of Lebanese students, as one example, to be viewed by the world community as an internal Lebanese affair anymore than we can allow the loss of another ChaldoAssyrian village in northern Iraq to be so seen. We need to evolve to a level of cooperation where any such instance in one area draws criticism from all of our groups.

A practical approach to allow us to develop such communication and a common understanding involves increasing contacts between our leaders and people at such conventions and meetings as these. Organizing joint conventions and symposia will help to "connect the dots" of our various scattered and isolated communities and increase cross pollination of ideas and strategies. Such approaches will send the signal to our neighbors as well as the world community that we are linked as a regional issue, not simply an internal domestic nuisance. Sponsoring research, position papers, research centers, and think tanks through the collaborative efforts of our organizations at the academic level will also have a synergistic effect. Organizing joint delegations of our leaders to our governments and representatives in the diaspora as well as to international organizations on the political level will undoubtedly augment our standing.

On behalf of the Assyrian Academic Society, we look forward to further collaboration with like-minded organizations from across the spectrum of our people.

References and Further Reading

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Catholic-Islamic committee condemns Iraq blasts

Reuters (03.08.2004) / HRWF Int. (05.08.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -- A joint Vatican-Muslim committee on Tuesday condemned the blasts that killed at least 11 people at churches in Iraq, branding them acts of blind violence that offend God and religion.

"We condemn in particular the suicide attacks (at) places of worship, both against Muslims and against Christians gathered for worship," it said.

The statement was signed by Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, and Dr. Hamid Bin Ahmad Al-Rifaie, president of the International Islamic Forum for Dialogue.

"Such acts of blind violence offend the sacred name of God and true religion. They evidence a gross misunderstanding of the history and culture of this sorely tried country. They represent a grave threat to peaceful coexistence and the ordered development of Iraqi society," the statement said.

It is our hope that, with the help of the Almighty and Merciful God, the Iraqi people may finally enjoy the gift of peace, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and genuine collaboration among all its citizens of whatever religious tradition," it said.

The Iraqi government has accused al Qaeda ally Abu Musab al-Zarqawi of carrying out coordinated car bombings on churches that killed at least 11 people on Sunday, saying the militants wanted to drive Christians out of the country.

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Iraqi Christians flee to Syria

by Salim Abraham

AP (03.08.2004) / HRWF Int. (05.08.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -- In small but steady numbers, Iraqi Christians are moving to Syria to escape the threats and violence of Islamic extremists, say Iraqi Christian exiles.

"The religious and ethnic pressure on us is tremendous," said Shamasha Muayad Shamoun Georges, 45, a deacon of the Chaldean Solaqa Church in Baghdad, who fled to Syria two weeks ago with his wife and five children.

Georges said the pressure comes from "Muslim extremists," not from the interim Iraqi government, which has a Christian as minister of immigration and refugees.

During Sunday evening mass, suspected Islamic militants set off a series of explosions at five churches in Baghdad and the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, killing at least seven people and wounding dozens. It was the first major assault on Iraq's Christian minority since the Iraqi war began last year.

Christians number about 750,000 people among Iraq's total population of about 25 million. They include the Chaldean-Assyrians, the majority sect, Armenians - one of whose churches was bombed on Sunday, Syrian Catholics and Syrian Orthodox.

Islamic militants have told Christian owners of liquor stores to close down their businesses, and they have threatened Christians who run beauty salons and shops selling fashionable clothes.

Georges said he does not expect such pressure to end soon.

Another Iraqi Christian in Syria, Jacqueline Isho, said that when Christians complain to the authorities in Iraq, they are "always ignored."

"Some police sympathize with, or support, those Islamists and gangs," Isho said.

Scores of Iraqi Christian families move to Syria and Jordan every day, according to Emanuel Khoshaba, a representative of the Iraqi Assyrian Democratic Movement in Syria.

Khoshaba said there are now 10,000 Iraqi Christians in Syria, and 90 per cent of them arrived after the Iraqi war began in March last year. Such figures could not be confirmed with government officials as Syrian and Jordanian immigration forms do not ask a person's religion.

"I have run away because gangs kept on threatening me," said Adeb Goga Matti, 48, who belongs to a wealthy Chaldean-Assyrian family in Baghdad.

He said his 10-year-old nephew, Patrous Yakou, was kidnapped at the end of 2003 and released only after his family paid a ransom of US\$15,000.

After the kidnapping, Matti stopped sending his four children to school.

"Chaldean-Assyrians are the easiest targets for gangsters because they don't belong to a tribal system like other Iraqis," Matti stressed. Muslim Iraqis tend to belong to clans who rally round and protect their members.

Matti is in Damascus applying for a visa to Australia. Iraqi Christians in Syria are also applying to emigrate to Canada, the United States and other Western countries.

Albert Sargon, 24, and his wife, Suhat, 26, left Iraq last month.

"I ran away from threatening messages sent by Islamists because I was working as a cook for Americans," Sargon said.

He and his wife do not plan to return.

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Bomb blasts rock Iraqi churches

Bombs have gone off near four churches in the Iraqi capital and one in the northern city of Mosul

BBC News (01.08.2004) / HRWF Int. (02.08.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -- At least 11 people are reported killed and dozens of others injured in what seems to be a new tactic by insurgents.

The first blast occurred outside an Armenian church in Baghdad, and three other churches were hit soon after in what looks like an orchestrated attack.

A blast was reported around the same time in Mosul, where a police station was bombed earlier in the day.

Witnesses said a car bomb detonated outside an Armenian church as an evening service was getting under way.

It blew out stained glass windows, and scattered pieces of hot metal across the street. The wreckage of at least three burned out cars was left in its wake.

"I saw injured women and children and men, the church's glass shattered everywhere. There's glass all over the floor," Juliette Agob, who was inside the church at the time, was quoted by the Associated Press as saying.

Attending mass

Ten minutes later, as the emergency services raced to the scene, a second blast went off outside a Syrian Catholic church about 400 metres from the first church.

An ambulance driver said two people had been killed.

Two further explosions followed in the capital. The largest number of casualties was in a church compound in southern Baghdad, where at least eight people were killed.

At around the same time as the Baghdad explosions, a suspected car bomb went off outside a church in the northern city of Mosul. One person was reported killed and several people wounded.

"It's a crime. It's Sunday, we were at mass. There were a lot of women and children," Bishop Raphael Kutami at the Syrian church was quoted by AFP news agency as saying.

"There are so many injured and we don't know how many. We were coming out of the church," when the bomb exploded, said another priest at the same church.

Respected

The Vatican has condemned the attacks.

"It is terrible and worrying because it is the first time that Christian churches are being targeted in Iraq," said Vatican deputy spokesman Father Ciro Benedettini.

The BBC's Peter Greste in Baghdad says that until now there has been no significant attacks on Iraq's Christian minority, although they were becoming increasingly concerned about the possibility of violence.

Many Christians run Iraq's alcohol shops, which have been subjected to recent attacks.

An interior ministry spokesman described them as one of Iraq's most respected groups.

But he also said the attackers may have been trying to antagonise the multinational forces in Iraq, who are from mostly Christian countries.

Earlier on Sunday, at least five people were killed and some 50 injured when a 4X4 vehicle drove at speed into a restricted entrance at a Mosul police station and exploded.

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Christians fear persecution in the new Iraq

by Jamie Tarabay

AP (26.07.2004) / HRWF Int. (27.07.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -- On a Sunday afternoon, attendance at mass at St. Peter and Paul's Cathedral in Baghdad was decidedly thin.

A handful of Syrian Orthodox loitered on the steps of the church afterward, women removing their dainty white lace veils as they chatted with friends. For many, church on Sunday is the only time they can really socialize because of safety fears.

Most Christians blame concern over a tumultuous security situation for keeping them away from church, but it's only a small part of a greater, and growing, predicament.

Numbering some 750,000, Christians are a minority here, and even as secular Iraqis worry about the growing tide of Islamic fundamentalism, so long repressed under Saddam Hussein, their Christian compatriots are feeling the effects closer to home. They're anxious about their place in the new world around them, one that often sees them as collaborators with their American occupiers.

The new Iraq seems destined to be dominated by a mix of Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites, leaving many Christians wondering if it is time to leave.

"It never used to be something we talked about at work," said one woman, who asked not to be named, butterfly clips pulling blond streaks away from her face. "But I hear it all the time from the Muslims in my office they say we should be part of the insurgency, they say we should all fight together against the Americans, that we should be involved."

"You know, we're all Iraqis in the end, we need to stick together," said one man, who was quickly shushed by his impatient wife, juggling an infant on one hip and stroking the hair of her pigtailed daughter with her free hand.

An initial subtle difference in the way her Muslim co-workers in a government office treated her soon evolved into full-fledged disdain, she claims.

"We feel it, we feel it so much more. Suddenly they don't like our clothes, we can't wear what we like, I'm afraid for our daughters," she said.

Now she wants to leave.

"Give me a ticket out of here, I would love it!" she exclaimed.

It's a delicate issue for Christians here who want to be seen to be supporting their reborn nation's attempts at clawing back toward a better way of life, especially when for many, the worsening circumstances was undeniable.

They were able to practice their faith in relative security, free from persecution under Saddam Hussein, and threats from Islamic radicals about liquor stores and beauty salons were always firmly dealt with.

Eighteen-year-old Fadi, studying accounting at Baghdad's university, spoke of learning to hold his tongue when Muslim students turned on him and his Christian friends.

"They think that because the Americans are Christians and we're Christian that we must be collaborating with them," he said. "There's more of them than there are of us, so we have to pull back without answering back."

Christians who fled Iraq before the war are in neighboring Jordan and Syria, waiting and watching before deciding whether to return, said Bishop Andreas at the Assumption of the Virgin Mary Church.

"They're very afraid," he admitted.

Of the 750,000 Christians in Iraq, the majority are Chaldean Roman Catholic, the rest Syrian Catholic, Syrian Orthodox and Assyrian. Most live in Baghdad and its outskirts and some dwell further to the north.

Islamic radicals have warned Christians running liquor stores to shut down their sales, and have turned their sights on fashion stores and beauty salons. The increasing attention on this minority community has many within looking for a way out.

Local newspapers reported that last week, the Chaldean Patriarch, the Rev. Emmanuel Delly, met with Iraqi interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi and told him that Christians wanted to flee the country because they feared for their lives in the new Iraq.

Allawi's office wouldn't comment on the report and Delly reacted furiously when confronted with the question.

"How can you ask me a question like that? Do I ask you who you visit?" he raised his voice at a reporter, knocking down a tape recorder.

He later softened to say the visit was "merely to congratulate him and his new government and to wish him all the best." He told his diocese to stand firm.

"I tell them that we love our nation, and we will work for a better Iraq," he said, fingering a large silver crucifix around his neck. He said he didn't know anything about threats to Iraqi Christians and their livelihoods.

Many Iraqi Christians are in neighboring countries applying with foreign embassies for travel visas to countries like Australia, said one Christian woman, who also declined to be named.

Shaking the hands of the last worshippers to leave the Cathedral, Father John could only shake his head at the dwindling number of parishioners coming to Mass each week. He said that while Saddam Hussein dragged the country through "war after war," Christians felt safer when he was in charge.

"We have no future in Iraq now," he said.

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Iraq's Christians consider fleeing as attacks on them rise

by Annia Ciezadlo

Christian Science Monitor (14.07.2004) / HRWF Int. (15.07.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -- It was 10:30 in the morning, almost four months ago, and the children were getting ready for church. Aziz Raad Azzo, 5 years old, was drinking his milk; his 14-year-old sister Raneen was putting on her new clothes. When they heard a car pull up, Raneen, thinking her father was home, ran to the window and flung open the shutters. Four men shot her and her little brother in the head.

The children's crime: Their father, a Christian storekeeper, had sold alcohol.

Before the murders, the family received a photocopied death threat. "We are warning you, the enemies of God and Islam, from selling alcohol again, and unless you stop we will kill you and send you to hell where a worse fate awaits you," reads the warning, signed by "Harakat Ansar al-Islam," the Partisans of Islam Movement.

Shortly after the murders, their father wrote a letter to an Iraqi human rights group. "Please save me," he begged, "and help me leave the country."

Facing a rising tide of persecution, Iraq's tiny Christian minority has a terrible choice: stay and risk their lives, or leave and abandon those left behind. Afraid of an Islamic future in which they would be outcasts, thousands are trying to flee. "It's like a huge amount of people lined up at the starting line, waiting for the gun to go off, and now it's going off," says the Rev. Ken Joseph, an Iraqi-American Christian activist in Baghdad. "For them to leave is a very big step, but that shows how badly people want to get out."

It is difficult to gauge the exodus, because most Christian groups, desperately wanting Christians to stay, deny that there is any problem. (Iraq's new minister of displacement and migration, Pascale Isho Warda, was in Europe and unavailable for comment.) But Issaq Issaq, director of international relations for the Assyrian Democratic Movement, estimates that about 2,000 families have tried to leave since summer began. "They want to leave, because they heard they can get asylum in Australia," he says. "We are trying to keep these people in Iraq, because it is their country."

In 1987, the Iraqi census showed about 1.4 million Christians. Then came Saddam Hussein's anfal ("spoils of war") campaign. In the late 1980s, the army rampaged through the country's north, attacking ethnic Kurds and systematically destroying more than 100 small Christian villages, razing scores of ancient monasteries and churches and deporting thousands of Christian families to Baghdad.

During the 1990s, a steady stream of Christians poured out of Iraq to Canada, Switzerland, Australia, and the United States - wherever they could get asylum. Today, fewer than 1 million remain in Iraq, divided among Assyrians, Chaldean Catholics, Armenians, and Syriac Christians.

In this dwindling community, talk of persecution is taboo. Those who admit to it are accused of helping the terrorists. "Newspapers publish this kind of thing in order to make propaganda, and scare the Christians into leaving the country," says the priest at the Sacred Heart Catholic church in central Baghdad. He begged not to have his name published. But he swears there is no Muslim-Christian hostility.

"We are brothers," says the priest, sweating inside the stifling rectory. "There is always this sympathy, and this tie of brotherhood between the Christians and the Muslims. Baghdad is considered a center of Christianity."

Outside the church, under the punishing 120-degree sun, the priest's bodyguard laughs. "Don't believe what our father said," he says, pointing out a fresh bullet hole next to the rectory door and reciting a litany of recent death threats. "He can go anywhere he likes, he can leave the country if he wants to. But he is not thinking about us, the poor Christians. That's why he doesn't want me to talk to you frankly and openly about this.... There is an immigration bureau in Syria, and most of the Christians are going there."

Ten minutes away, in the Bab Sharji market, Ahmed al-Maamouri scorns Christian claims of brotherhood.

"I am unhappy about them, because Iraq is our country," says the young Muslim merchant. "They are like a white termite: They are eating the country from the inside. But if they hear a loud voice, they will keep quiet. The Christians are cowards - they are not going to fight."

Attacks have increased. Saturday, Islamic militants in Mosul and Baquba blew up four liquor stores. Sunday, fanatics attacked a liquor store in downtown Baghdad, shouting "God is great" as they machine-gunned bottles of beer and wine and kidnapped an employee.

Not all Christians are killed by Islamic militants. Issaq has compiled a list of 102 Christians killed since April 9, 2003. Some were killed for selling alcohol; others for working with Americans as translators or laundresses. (About 10 percent were killed by coalition troops, casualties of postwar violence.) Many were kidnapped and killed for money, a fate that befalls Muslims, too.

But sometimes it's hard to separate kidnappings from religious murders. Among Iraqis, there's a widespread belief that Christians are wealthy. This stereotype, too, can kill. On June 2, gangs kidnapped a young Christian storekeeper named Saher Faraj Mirkhai. Thinking he was rich, the gang demanded a ransom of \$100,000. After selling their furniture, his 16-year-old truck, and the stock of his downtown Baghdad store, his family scraped together all the money they could find: about \$13,500.

After they paid, the family got a phone call from Saher's cellphone. "We asked for \$100,000, and you paid this miserable amount of money," said the voice, cursing them with foul language. The next day, police found Saher's body, pierced by over 30 bullets and severely mutilated.

Because of their religion, and the fact that many Christians speak English or have relatives abroad, there's also a widespread perception that Christians are pro-American.

"There is a common ground between them and the Americans, so it was very easy for them to work with the Americans," says Khaled Abed, a Muslim street peddler who believes that "about 40 percent" of Christians work for occupation forces. "So you could say that the Christians used the current situation for their own benefit."

Like many others, Mr. Maamouri, the Muslim merchant, sees Christians as sympathetic to the American occupiers. "When the Americans invaded Iraq, they thought God had delivered them," he says. "They think that this is their day."

The peace between Christians and Muslims in Iraq, ever fragile, has always cracked in the crucible of national crisis. In 1931, as the British Empire handed over Iraq to a "sovereign" government of its choosing, the country's Assyrian Christian minority begged for a protected enclave or permission to migrate en masse. The British rejected both, offering them a deal instead: Assyrian soldiers could guard Britain's air bases inside Iraq.

This illusory British "protection" proved fatal. In July 1933, a band of armed Assyrians tried to flee into neighboring Syria, and a border skirmish erupted. Iraqi authorities portrayed it as a full-blown insurrection by an Assyrian fifth column trying to bring back their imperialist protectors. That summer, Iraqi troops and armed Kurdish tribesmen led a massacre against Assyrians, culminating in the slaughter of hundreds of helpless Assyrian villagers on August 11. On their return to Baghdad, a cheering populace showered the troops with rose water and pelted them with flowers for their victory in crushing the Assyrian "revolt."

Today, Assyrians are again asking for a protected province in the north, as well as money to fund a hotline and three safe houses for victims of anti-Christian crimes. "If we can get a zone in the north of Iraq, the rest of Iraq is going to go to hell, but we can be safe," says Mr. Joseph. "Otherwise, Chicago and San Diego and Detroit had better get ready for another flood of Assyrian refugees."

About a month ago, a rumor tore through Baghdad's Christian community, half a million strong, that Australia had agreed to give Christians political asylum. Frantic asylum-seekers flooded passport offices and churches trying to get copies of their baptismal certificates.

Salwan, who asked that his last name not be published, was one of them. On June 19, he took a \$10 taxi from Baghdad to Damascus. The next morning, he went to the UN High

Commissioner for Refugees office on Maliki Street. On the sidewalk, hundreds of Iraqis waited in line. Most had slept there overnight, hoping to get in and register as refugees.

Salwan, a moonfaced young businessman, had already camped out overnight on the pavement twice. Each time, the office closed before he reached the head of the line. This time, he talked his way to the head of the line and got his prize: an official UNHCR document noting that he is an Armenian Catholic and giving him six months to apply for refugee status.

Now back in Baghdad, he says he loves Iraq, but he is hoping the UN will call him and tell him he can go to Australia: "Because of the situation, and because all my family is there, and because I cannot bear the life here anymore."

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New Iraqi census officially recognizes ChaldoAssyrians

Assyrian International News Agency (09.07.2004) / HRWF Int. (12.07.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> –

Email: info@hrwf.net -- With the handover of sovereignty by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) now complete, the new interim government in Iraq has begun to prepare the groundwork for nationwide elections now set for 2005. Reports have surfaced that in preparation for a nationwide census, a new draft census form including the various Iraqi constituent groups has been prepared. The draft survey form reportedly includes Arabs, Turkoman, Armenians, Kurds, and Assyrians. The inclusion of Assyrians (also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs) marks a historic milestone in that under the former regime Assyrians were deliberately classified as Arabs, despite their protestations. As a direct result, past Iraqi censuses have resulted in Assyrian under representation.

The initial draft version of the census form caused some concern and confusion within the Assyrian community. Reportedly, the new draft form originally included the term "Ashori" -- the Arabic version of Assyrian. For Iraqi Assyrians, the preferred term for official governmental business is "ChaldoAssyrian." This term was overwhelmingly adopted by Iraqi Assyrians during the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian General Conference in Baghdad in October of 2003. The Baghdad conference, sponsored by the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) and the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO), was unimaginable just a few months earlier under the past Baathist regime. During a very critical period, the ChaldoAssyrian community of Iraq convened the meeting to formally adopt the official name to be included in any future Iraqi constitution as well as to press for recognition of an Assyrian self-administered area in the Nineveh Plain. The adoption of ChaldoAssyrian is broadly seen as the best way to avoid external threats to exacerbate internal tensions over the name issue that might otherwise result in fragmentation of the third largest demographic group in Iraq.

Formal complaints by various groups within the community to the census bureau have, according to insiders, led to the census bureau acknowledging that ChaldoAssyrian will indeed be the term utilized in the census form. Prior to the anticipated reversal, Assyrian leaders had feared that the draft version represented an affront to the Assyrian community's political expression as well as potential fragmentation of the community in the upcoming census. As one leader noted, "there was concern that the resulting tension and confusion might lead to another undercounting of our people in Iraq." Another analyst added, "It remains critical at this time to not deviate from the agreed upon formula of the Baghdad conference in order to not hand our adversaries the victory of under representation of our people there once again."

The inclusion of "Ashori" in any form has itself been seen as highly significant on another count as well. During the previous regime, there was a deliberate distinction made in Arabic

between "Ashoris" and "Athoris." As part of the Arabization campaign of the Baath regime, Ashori referred to ancient Assyrians while Athori referred to today's Assyrians as a Christian Arab religious minority. By making such a distinction, the government deemed today's Assyrians unrelated to the ancient Assyrians in order to deny Assyrians their legitimate ethnic, historical, cultural and indigenous status within Iraq. In the Assyrian language (Syriac), there is no distinction between the two terms and both are used interchangeably. Appropriately, the new proposed census form uses the term Ashori (or ChaldoAshori) acknowledging the historical continuity of the Assyrians of Iraq.

One of the greatest challenges facing Assyrians in Iraq today remains a proper accounting of numbers. Community estimates outside Iraq have put the numbers at between 6-10%, while in Iraq Assyrians are given only 4% representation. No real hard facts are known since Assyrians have never been included in official Iraqi censuses, they were fragmented as separate religious minorities along Church denominations. One Assyrian observer bitterly noted "We constituted just over 10% of the casualties of the Iran-Iraq War. How is it, then, that we are 'allowed' to die for our country proportionately, but not allowed to be represented politically fairly to the same extent?"

Some of the responsibility of seeing that all Assyrians are counted in the upcoming census will fall on the shoulders of the new ChaldoAssyrian Minister of Immigration and Refugees, Ms. Pascale Warda Eshoo. Although Assyrians continue to protest only one ministerial position, the new ministerial level appointment of Ms. Eshoo is seen as highly significant because through that position she may be able to contend with the two most vexing issues for Assyrians in Iraq. First, she will be able to assist with displaced Assyrians within Iraq. Secondly, from the perspective of representation, she will be able to assist with properly registering Assyrians in the diaspora. One analyst noted, "In the US alone, 80-90% of Iraqi-Americans are Assyrian. Even if , pending a fair census, we are only 1.5 million in Iraq, there are at least hundreds of thousands outside Iraq that need to be counted." Another observer explained the discrepancy of 6-10% of a nation's population contributing 80-90% of its diaspora by simply summarizing "disproportionate persecution has led to disproportionate emigration."

Despite the climate of fear and intimidation that the horrendous security situation has engendered, there have been some recent hopeful signs for Assyrians. The new Iraqi interim President recently acknowledged the importance of the Assyrian diaspora community. Speaking in Washington to an audience of Iraqi expatriates, Sheikh Ghazi al-Yawer stated that the Assyrians are the indigenous people of Iraq and are an important and integral part of government. Their fair representation will be ensured in the new political makeup inside and outside of Iraq, where they represent a majority of the Iraqi Diaspora communities.

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Iraqi churches under threat

ACLC (11.04.2004) / HRWF Int. (19.04.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -- *Saraya Al Mujahedin* (a group of religious militants) issued a bulletin in which it warned the occupation forces that it would destroy a church for every demolished mosque or *husainiya* (a Shiite gathering place). They also stated that they would either kill or kidnap a Christian priest for every Sunni or Shiite sheikh killed or detained by the occupation forces.

The bulletin which was diffused by Al-Arabiya channel seemed to be a message to the occupation forces to leave religious symbols out of the struggle.

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Iraqi interim constitution ambiguous on religious freedom

By Julie Stahl

CNSNews.com (07.04.2004) / HRWF Int. (19.04.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -- Iraqi Christians are concerned that the new Iraqi interim constitution may or may not provide freedom of worship and religion to non-Muslim Iraqis, a Christian group says.

The constitution, signed on March 8 by all 25 members of the Iraqi governing council, has been hailed as progressive by Middle East standards.

But Paul Cooke, advocacy manager for the British-based Barnabus Fund, described the constitution as "very ambiguous" in regards to religious freedom.

"What was positive was the stress on the individual," Cooke said. What was negative, on the other hand, he said was that like in so many Islamic countries, the "back door" is left open to curtail those individual freedoms.

Article 13F of the Iraqi interim constitution, known as the Transitional Administrative Law (T.A.L.), states that, "Each Iraqi has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religious belief and practice. Coercion in such matters shall be prohibited."

Article 7A states that Islam will be considered only as "a" source of legislation rather than "the" source; and the same article "guarantees the full religious rights of all individuals to freedom of religious belief and practice."

While these articles are "good news" for the Christian community and other religious minorities, the Barnabus Fund said in a statement, that good news is tempered by another element in Article 7A, which says, "No law that contradicts the universally agreed tenets of Islam...may be enacted."

"This could be used to argue against the freedoms, which have apparently been granted to non-Muslims," said the Barnabus Fund.

One example the group gives is that of an adult male Muslim who converts to another religion. All streams of Islamic law agree he should be killed. The question then is how would such a case be handled in Iraq, where a separate constitutional article guarantees "freedom of...religious belief and practice."

"The crunch point of religious freedom [is the right] to proselytize and change [one's] religion," Cooke said. He described it as a "key" point that had been omitted.

Phyllis Bennis, a fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies, recently wrote an article saying that while the constitution grants a number of individual political, economic and social rights, including freedom of speech, association, assembly, religion, travel and the right to strike and demonstrate, it is not clear what role Islamic law will play.

"The text...states that 'all Iraqis are equal in their rights without regard to gender, sect, opinion, belief, nationality, religion, or origin, and they are equal before the law,'" Bennis wrote.

"The problem comes - as is the case in the U.S., Europe and elsewhere - not so much in the written law as in its implementation. In this regard, Iraq is unlikely to be very different.

"The relationship between religious law and individual liberty remains unclear. Islam is to be relied on as 'a source' for Iraqi laws, and the constitution states that no law may contradict either Islamic law or the guarantees of individual rights," she wrote.

According to both Bennis and the Barnabus Fund, while the new constitution has been touted as unique in the Islamic world, similar guarantees have been included in the constitutions of other Muslim nations.

One example is Iran, the Barnabus Fund said. While the Iranian constitution forbids investigating the beliefs of individuals and molesting individuals for maintaining a certain belief, it also states that Islamic Sharia law can be applied. That would include a death sentence for anyone who leaves Islam.

Hussein Soodmand was officially executed for converting from Islam to Christianity in 1990. Since then, however, converts usually disappear without a trace, the Barnabus Fund said.

Nevertheless, Cooke said, Christians in Iraq had been surprised by the appearance that some in the governing council may be committed to a secular democratic government. Although the Christians are still "very nervous" he said, they realize the situation is better than it could have been.

Last month, as the interim constitution was being signed, Council President Mohammed Bahr al-Uloom called it "the first stone on which a new, free and democratic Iraq will be built, respectful of human rights."

The U.S. administrator in Iraq, Paul Bremer, said, "Not everybody got everything they wanted in this law, but that is the way democracy works."

One of the oldest Christian communities in the world, there are some 700,000 Assyrian Christians in Iraq - about three percent of the total Iraqi population of 23 million.

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Iraqis intimidate in the name of religion: fear stifles new freedom

by Ken Dilanian

Knight Ridder Newspapers (29.03.2004) / HRWF Int. (30.03.2004) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- Given the choice, Rana al Asadi would not wear a head scarf. But a few weeks ago, the 22-year-old English major at Basra University decided she didn't have that choice anymore.

Menacing groups of men have been stopping cars at the university gates and haranguing women whose heads are uncovered, accusing them of violating Islamic law. Male students have accosted women as they walked to class. As al Asadi spoke to a reporter in a courtyard, a scruffy-looking man handed out flyers that likened uncovered women to prostitutes and murderers.

"I fear them," she said simply.

Shi'ite Muslim extremists, backed by armed militias, are waging a campaign of intimidation to enforce a strict Islamic code of conduct in Iraq's second largest city. Neither the Iraqi police nor the British forces occupying Basra seem willing or able to stop it.

While there are no known cases of women being attacked for not covering up, three alcohol vendors and two bystanders were gunned down in February, the latest in a string of such assaults. A few weeks ago, gunmen shot and killed a woman who ran a shop that sold videos.

There appears to be widespread sympathy, especially among men, for some of the religious militias' goals, underscoring the British dilemma. Several people expressed support for the killings of the alcohol dealers, for example, saying they were peddling their wares on a vice-infested street that became a public nuisance.

Effective extremism

In Basra, a port city near Kuwait and a Shi'ite stronghold of 1.4 million people once known for its nightclubs, it's now nearly impossible to buy an alcoholic drink. Head scarves are almost universal now at the university.

Basra, which gets far less attention from Western news media than Baghdad does, largely has been seen as a success, mainly because there have been far fewer attacks on the British troops who patrol there than on U.S. troops farther north.

But the effectiveness of religious extremists' campaign raises questions about whether freedoms of expression and religion -- newly enshrined in Iraq's interim constitution -- will survive in the Shi'ite-dominated south after the coalition returns authority to Iraqis this summer.

"We believe that we are the supreme legislative authority in Iraq, because our constitution is the holy Koran, and for us, the holy Koran is the supreme constitution," said Sheikh Abdul-Sattar al Bahadli, who runs the Basra office of hard-line Shi'ite leader Muqtada al-Sadr.

Al Bahadli said al-Sadr's organization performed charitable and community work in Basra. It also conducts armed patrols, he said. A few months ago, the group met with video merchants.

"We told them that Iraq is living under certain norms and tribal traditions. Before these meetings, there were violations of the Arab, Islamic morals. In particular, there were sexy films. And after these meetings, there was a positive response in the marketplace."

Video sellers say it wasn't gentle persuasion that made them stop selling risqué films, but terror. In addition to the woman's killing, merchants have been kidnapped and beaten. Al Bahadli said he renounces such tactics.

No arrests have been made in the killings, and an Iraqi police official said none were forthcoming.

Many residents say the police and the British troops are ineffective, not only against religious militias, but against regular street crime. Killings, carjackings and kidnappings are on the rise, according to a deputy medical examiner who tracks the body count at the Basra morgue.

Criminal element

Crime is a problem throughout Iraq, but in a January poll by Baghdad's Institute for Civil Society Studies, 67 percent of Basra residents said they felt unsafe in their neighborhoods, compared with 48 percent in Baghdad.

The British army, which occupies Basra with about 8,200 soldiers, prefers to let the Iraqi police fight crime, although soldiers occasionally mount joint operations with the locals.

The British, steeped in colonial experience, have taken a hands-off approach to religious militias.

"We're not here to change the culture, and we're not here to create a utopia," said Maj. Tim Smith, a British army spokesman. "A lot of the problems that are happening here in society are as much for the Iraqis to sort out as well as us."

He and other British officials acknowledged that religious extremism is a problem in Basra, but he dismissed the charge that British forces are standing aside as militias run rampant.

In the months after major combat ended, Smith said, the British allowed the militias to take a lead role in security patrols, as part of their philosophy of rapidly empowering local authorities.

"That was a mistake. We're probably paying for it now," said Gareth Davies, the senior law-and-order adviser for the Coalition Provisional Authority's southern office.

In two dozen interviews with Basra residents, nearly everyone said the British are too lax on crime gangs and militias. Many said the Iraqi police are often too scared -- or too sympathetic -- to fight them.

Smith said British forces were working to contain and disarm the militias. But it's a delicate issue. There's no insurgency to speak of in Basra, where Shi'ites were happy to see the end of deposed President Saddam Hussein's regime.

"It's something we have to be very pragmatic about and, of course, if we appear pragmatic, some people might look at it as being complacent," Smith said.

Another complication: Among the dozens of religious militias, some behave responsibly, residents and police officials say, while others are little more than criminal gangs.

The Badr Brigade, a large Iranian-backed militia, said last week that it was negotiating to integrate itself into the Iraqi security forces. But locals say smaller groups, some of them affiliated with fringe political parties, will be much harder to control.

"I'd like to see Iraq free of these people," said Nesreen Qassim, 20, a psychology major who was one of the few women on the Basra campus last week who weren't wearing head scarves. "I just want to tell them: 'Why are you imposing your views on others?'"

"As for my security, I fear a lot."

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Missionaries killed in Iraq serving growing churches

Middle East Concern (16.03.2004) / HRWF Int. (16.03.2004) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- A group of five American Missionaries were attacked on the eastern side of Mosul, Northern Iraq on Monday, 15th March, whilst conducting a feasibility study into a water purification project. Three died at the scene, and a fourth on Tuesday morning. There were no witnesses of the attack, which appears to be part of a general pattern of targeting western civilians in addition to military personnel. Across Iraq, indigenous Christian Churches are re-organising itself to reflect diversity in worship but unity in purpose in order to serve their members and express the Christian faith within their communities. Many expatriate Christians experience a warm welcome from the Iraqis they go to assist.

The victims of Monday's attack were found after one of them, David McDonnall (28), alert friends by phone. They were first taken to a local hospital and later the American military transferred them to one of their facilities. David died on Tuesday morning, despite army surgeons working for six hours in an attempt to save his life. His wife Carrie (26) remains in a critical, but stable, condition. This couple were newly married, and have no children. Those who died at the scene were Larry Elliott (aged 60), Jean Elliott (58) and Karen Watson (38).

Under Saddam Hussein the Presbyterian Church was the only allowed Protestant Church. Now, churches have the freedom to organise as they wish and are doing so. The opening ceremony of the National Evangelical Baptist Church in Baghdad, the first Baptist church in Iraq, was attended by 700 people. The Baptist Union of Iraq was founded in October with five member churches. Another church in Baghdad has nearly completed the construction of its 450-seater building, but already this is too small for its growing congregation. This growing number of churches provides a diversity of worship services. Representatives of several Protestant churches are discussing forming an Evangelical Alliance, as exists in many countries, to facilitate working together in unity wherever appropriate.

Many Christians in Iraq speak with confidence about the future, and their biggest need is for leadership training for local Christians to be able to lead the newly emerging churches. Missionaries in Iraq are assisting with this need, and are also bringing equally essential development assistance to the country, for example, the water purification project the team attacked in Mosul were studying.

Many expatriate Christians in Iraq report a wonderful, warm, welcome from local people. One group who wondered if they would be attacked were welcomed by a tribal leader as brothers. The local people gladly unloaded both food supplies from the team's truck, and the tribal leader gladly accepted a New Testament as a gift, indeed he later contacted the team leader and asked to discuss what he had read.

Elsewhere in Iraq, some Christians have felt obliged to leave their homes and flee the country because of intense pressure from religious extremists. Iraq is indeed a diverse country, and Iraqi Christians, like their compatriots, experience great sorrows as well as great joys.

This latest attack is the second to kill Christian workers following the death on 14th February of Pastor Kelley, who died when the taxi he was travelling in with a group of fellow American pastors was attacked on the outskirts of Baghdad. Three colleagues were wounded in the attack, which occurred as the group returned from a sight-seeing trip outside the city.

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Poisoning hit Iraq minority community

UPI (10.03.2004) / HRWF Int. (11.03.2004) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- An estimated 400 Iraqis from the minority Muslim Yazid sect were poisoned in northern Iraq, apparently from drinking water which was contaminated deliberately.

Daily Taakhi, the newspaper of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, said dozens of inhabitants in the town of Khanki, in the province of Dahouk, 550 kilometers (315 miles) north of Baghdad, were taken to hospital for severe poisoning and many died Wednesday from dehydration.

The newspaper said that the poisoning appeared to be a terrorist act.

It said the incident occurred a few days after writings were found on walls in the northern city of Mosul calling for the killing of Yazidis, who were described as infidels.

Yazidis, estimated at only 10,000, follow an offshoot sect of Shiism and consider themselves part of the Kurdish ethnicity. They mostly live in towns and villages west of Mosul and north of the Kurdish province of Dahouk.

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Iraqi leaders strike compromise on basic law after marathon talks

AFP (01.03.2004) / HRWF Int. (02.03.2004) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- Iraqi leaders overcame ethnic and religious divisions, under the watchful eye of US officials, to agree on a temporary constitution for the war-torn country that will be signed mid-week.

The basic law text negotiated the thorny issues of the role of Islam, Kurdish self-rule and the representation of women that had forced the US-picked interim Governing Council to miss a Saturday deadline for completion.

"We just broke out (of the meeting). The Fundamental Law has been concluded," a jubilant Intifah Qanbar, spokesman for Ahmed Chalabi representing Iraq's Shiite Muslim majority, told AFP just before 4:30 am (0130 GMT) on Monday.

Council member Mahmud Othman, a Kurd, was also pleased with the outcome.

"The discussions are finished and there is no longer any problem. It is a major achievement," he said, adding that the text would be signed Wednesday after the end of the Shiite religious mourning period of Ashura.

The 25 council members, with guidance from US overseer Paul Bremer and British representative Jeremy Greenstock, worked day and night to finalise the law, aimed at seeing Iraq through a period of transition ahead of elections and into next year.

The temporary constitution -- made up of about 60 articles -- will enshrine a bill of rights, protecting such values as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of assembly, when it takes effect at the end of June.

"It is an incredibly comprehensive bill of rights," said an official of the US-led military coalition, which ousted dictator Saddam Hussein's secular regime last April.

"This is a bill of rights for a society that has been tortured and devastated for 35 years by a totalitarian system that we believe shares the company of the Nazis, the Third Reich, and the Stalinist regime."

The document, which allows for civilian control of the military, is an important step in clearing the way for a June 30 transfer of sovereignty from the coalition to an Iraqi interim authority.

It sets a timeline for direct elections before the end of January 2005 and lays out the framework of the "transitional national assembly" which will then draft a permanent constitution.

Iraq's Christian community were happy with the new law, but an official from the Turkmen ethnic group, the country's third largest, was less than pleased.

"We're satisfied. We have obtained what we asked for. Article four preserves the political, administrative and cultural rights of the Assyrians and Turkmen," Yonnadam Yussef Kanna, a Christian member of the council, told AFP.

"We consider this law a failure not a success," said Saadeddin Mohammad Arkaj, deputy of the Iraqi Turkmen Front (FIT) party. "We refuse to be classed a minority because we are one of Iraq's main ethnic components."

The discussions have forced contentious issues into the spotlight such as whether Islam should be the basis for the constitution, a priority for many ordinary Iraqis to give the document legitimacy in their eyes.

Qanbar said: "Islam will be a source and there shall not be any law against Islam. It will preserve the rights of the individual."

The use of the word "source" was probably a compromise for Bremer, who had threatened to use his veto if the law was based entirely on Islam and the rights of minorities were not protected.

On the dispute over setting up a federal state, Qanbar suggested the details would be finalised once a new transitional government is put in place.

"Kurdistan will continue to be federal, the rest of Iraq will be given the right to prepare to form federal states. The elected government will decide on the status of federalism and deal with this strategic situation," he said.

The Kurdish north of the country has enjoyed autonomy since 1991, in defiance of Saddam, and the Kurds had demanded that they be allowed to maintain their prerogatives.

On the question of women, the law specifies a target of 25-percent representation for women in Iraq's first directly-elected assembly.

The goal falls short of the 40 percent demanded by women and some secular council members, but it still offers women far stronger assurances than they are granted in other Middle East countries.

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U.S. may veto Islamic law in Iraq

Jim Krane/AP (16.02.2004) / HRWF Int. (18.02.2004) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- The top U.S. administrator in Iraq suggested Monday he would block any interim constitution that would make Islam the chief source of law, as some members of the Iraqi Governing Council have sought.

L. Paul Bremer said the current draft of the constitution would make Islam the state religion of Iraq and "a source of inspiration for the law" — as opposed to the main source.

Many Iraqi women have expressed fears that the rights they hold under Iraq's longtime secular system would be rolled back in the interim constitution being written by U.S.-picked Iraqi leaders and their advisers, many of them Americans. U.S. lawmakers have urged the White House to prevent Islamic restrictions on Iraqi women.

Asked what would happen if Iraqi leaders wrote into the constitution that Islamic sharia law is the principal basis of the law, Bremer suggested he would wield his veto. "Our position is clear. It can't be law until I sign it," he said.

Bremer must sign into law all measures passed by the 25-member council, including the interim constitution. Iraq's powerful Shiite clergy, however, has demanded the document be approved by an elected legislature. Under U.S. plans, a permanent constitution would not be drawn up and voted on until 2005.

Bremer used the inauguration ceremony at a women's center in the southern city of Karbala to argue for more than "token" women's representation in the transitional government due to take power June 30.

"I think it is very important that women be represented in all the political bodies," Bremer said.

"Women are the majority in this country, in this area probably a substantial majority," he said, referring to the Saddam Hussein's 1991 purges of Shiite Muslim men. Those killings left the holy city of Karbala and other Shiite cities dotted with mass graves and brimming with thousands of widows.

Bremer and an entourage of reporters flew from Baghdad into this Shiite holy city in a pair of U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopters. He toured a women's center renovated by U.S. and seized Iraqi funds, pausing to chat with women and girls who were sewing curtains and surfing the Internet.

In a speech to about 100 women — most dressed in flowing black abayas and some with tattooed chins — Bremer cited a 2003 United Nations report that found that productivity in Arab countries was being strangled because women had been kept out of the work force. Bremer suggested that women's participation did not run counter to Muslim values.

"Women who can read and write and understand mathematics are not prevented from being good mothers. Quite the opposite," Bremer told the gathering. "No son is better off because his mother and sisters cannot read."

Nawal Jabar, 44, whose husband was killed in the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, said she joined the women's center to learn a trade.

"Either my mother or my brother has supported me from time to time since my husband died," Jabar said. "It's a very bad situation. But I am hoping I can get a job here so that I can support my kids."

Enshrining women's rights in a constitution could be difficult. U.S. observers have predicted liberal reforms introduced in the transitional law could well be rolled back in a future constitution. Bremer acknowledged that U.S. influence on an Iraqi constitution would fade after the June 30 handover.

"There will be a sovereign government here in June. The Iraqis then will then have responsibility for their own country," Bremer said. "There's a real hunger for democracy in this country. It may not look like American democracy, but there's a real hunger for it and we're encouraging that."

There are three women on the Governing Council.

Mohsen Abdel-Hamid, the current council president and a member of a committee drafting the interim constitution, has proposed making Islamic sharia law the "principal basis" of legislation.

The phrasing could have broad effects on secular Iraq. In particular, it would likely make moot much of Iraq's 1959 Law of Personal Status, which grants uniform rights to husband and wife to divorce and inheritance, and governs related issues like child support.

Under most interpretations of Islamic law, women's rights to seek divorce are strictly limited and they only receive half the inheritance of men. Islamic law also allows for polygamy and often permits marriage of girls at a younger age than secular law.

In December, the council passed a decision abolishing the 1959 law and allowing each of the main religious groups to apply its own tradition — including Islamic law. Many Iraqi women expressed alarm at the decision, and Bremer has not signed it into law.

Earlier this month, 45 members of the U.S. House of Representatives signed a letter to President Bush urging him to preserve women's rights.

"It would be a tragedy beyond words if Iraqi women lost the rights they had under Saddam Hussein, especially when the purpose of our mission in Iraq was to make life better for the Iraqi people," the letter read.

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Local pastor killed in Iraq

AP (15.02.2004) / HRWF Int. (18.02.2004) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- A South Kingstown missionary was shot to death in Iraq when gunmen opened fire on his vehicle in an attack that also wounded three others, according to a member of his church.

John Kelley, 48, was traveling near Baghdad with several other pastors when a white sedan pulled up alongside them and opened fire, said Roland Vukic, of Charlestown, a member of Curtis Corner Church and a close friend of Kelley's.

Vukic said he was told of the incident in a phone call Saturday from another pastor who was also in Iraq.

U.S. paratroopers learned of Saturday's attack while conducting a patrol in the town of Mahmudiyah, about 15 miles south of Baghdad, and were told the Americans were being treated at a hospital there.

A statement from the U.S. military said the Americans were part of a "religious group" but did not identify it.

Vukic described Curtis Corner as an independent, fundamentalist Baptist church whose members regularly "preach the Gospel" in their communities and seek to establish new churches around the world.

He said Kelley and about 10 other pastors from the New England area left on Feb. 6 to help start a church in Baghdad.

"We're really grieved. He was a really good guy. He was what every pastor should be -- a great family man, very genuine, worked hard for his parish," said Sam Stricklin, a pastor at First Baptist Church in Warwick.

Stricklin said the three others injured in the ambush were pastors at churches in Connecticut, Massachusetts and New York, respectively.

Kelley leaves a wife and four children. A message left at their home was not immediately returned.

Kelley was the pastor at Curtis Corner, a parish of about 120 people, for 18 years.

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Top Iraqi official wants Islam-based law

by Jim Krane

AP (10.02.2004) / HRWF Int. (11.02.2004) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- Iraq's current top official has demanded that Islam be the principal basis for Iraq's laws, a move that breaches a previous agreement among the framers of the interim constitution and creates the possibility that Islamic law could rule the land.

If approved, the proposal could have broad effects on secular Iraq, taking away rights of women in divorce and inheritance cases, shuttering liquor stores and banning gambling, legal advisers here say. Elements also run counter to President Bush's goal of turning Iraq into a beacon for democracy in the Middle East.

"There could be changes in the Iraqi state," said Salem Chalabi, a legal adviser to the Governing Council and a member of the 10-member committee framing the basic transitional law, which acts as an interim constitution and is to take effect at the end of this month.

"If someone proposes a law of inheritance that conflicts with sharia, or Islam, then it's invalid," Chalabi said. "The registration of liquor stores may become illegal."

Mohsen Abdel-Hamid, the current president of Iraq's U.S.-picked Governing Council and a member of a drafting committee, proposed the change last week. Abdel-Hamid is a Sunni Muslim scholar who heads the Iraqi Islamic Party, which espouses a conservative view of Islam.

Speaking to reporters Saturday, Abdel-Hamid said he wants "a constitution that represents the Islamic identity of the majority of the Iraqi people, with all the respect due to other identities."

Islamic law influences the legal code throughout most of the Middle East, but in relatively secular countries, such as Egypt, loopholes are applied in certain areas, for example to allow Western-style banking and in rules governing women's dress.

Saudi Arabia, however, follows an Islam-based legal code that provides for amputations for theft and public beheadings for murder and rape.

In an interview televised on NBC's "Meet the Press" Sunday, Bush said Iraqis would not approve of an extremist Islamic regime.

"They're not going to develop that. And the reason I can say that is because I'm very aware of this basic law they're writing," Bush said.

Bush said he discussed the law with three Governing Council members who assured him a future constitution would enshrine minority rights and freedom of religion.

Abdel-Hamid's measure would not take away freedom to practice other religions, but would make Islamic codes the arbiter of future laws, with exceptions made for minority religions. The proposal sparked what framers of the law called "heated" discussions.

Perhaps the largest effect would be to moot much of Iraq's 1959 Law of Personal Status, which grants uniform rights to husband and wife to divorce and inheritance, and governs related issues like child support, Chalabi said.

Representatives of Iraq's Kurdish and Christian parties, and those with liberal Western views have voiced opposition to the Islamization of Iraq's legal code, and the issue remains under discussion. Women would be most affected, said one opponent.

"If this happens 50 percent of Iraqi society will need to be liberated," said Younadem Kana, a Christian member of the Governing Council. "We need to fight for the rights of all Iraqis — women and minorities as well."

Speaking in defense of the proposal, Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, a Shiite cleric and member of the Governing Council, said on Saturday that future Iraqi legislators would be prevented from adopting laws that violate Islam. Al-Hakim also said special cases could be made for non-Muslim minorities, including Iraq's 1 million Christians, whose rights to purchase alcohol could be protected.

Committee members said the law, if passed, would bring Iraq's legal code far short of those espoused by more conservative neighbors such as Saudi Arabia — where women aren't permitted to vote or drive.

"Nobody's suggesting that Iraq become an Islamic state," Chalabi said. "Nobody's really going that far."

To take effect, the Islamic law proposal would have to be approved by the framing committee and added to the transitional law, which must be accepted by the full Governing Council.

U.S. administrator L. Paul Bremer is vested with power to veto the measure. A request for comment made Monday to the U.S.-led occupation authority went unanswered.

The transition law is to act as Iraq's constitution until a permanent constitution replaces it, probably by 2005.

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Christians killed by masked gunmen and suicide bombers

AP (22.01.2004) / Zindamagazine.com / HRWF Int. (26.01.2004) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- Three Assyrian and one Armenian women died yesterday when masked gunmen raked their vehicle with automatic fire. Five other women and the male driver were wounded.

The Armenian victim, Askhik Varoijan, worried about her job in the laundry of a U.S. military base after insurgents began targeting Iraqis who were cooperating with the occupation forces.

She boarded a minibus Wednesday for her job at the U.S. base at Habaniyah, 50 miles west of Baghdad, determined to hand in her resignation rather than live in fear.

"She went yesterday to tell them that she wouldn't go to work any more and to claim her salary," Varojan's sister, Eida Varojan, sobbed.

The four dead women are the latest Iraqi civilians to fall victim to insurgents who attack occupation forces and civilians perceived as supporting them.

Last Sunday, 31 people were killed when a suicide bomber blew up his truck at a gate to coalition headquarters used by Iraqis who work for the coalition or who are applying for jobs. Credible evidence from Baghdad shows that as many as 14 victims were Christian Assyrians, one whom two were killed.

Varojan took the job at Habaniyah three weeks ago to support her paralyzed husband and four children, relatives said.

On Thursday, her coffin was brought to the dingy one-room apartment, where relatives gathered to mourn. Her 20-year-old daughter, Anjel, fainted from grief.

"Come and see our home in order to know why we work (with the Americans)," said another daughter, Emma Hagoub, 25. "My father had a stroke and can't work. We live six people in one room."

Vera Ibrahim, 39, one of the survivors of Wednesday's attack, said some of the women were dozing when an Opel car began pursuing their vehicle and two buses traveling in convoy on the highway between Baghdad and Habaniyah, where the women worked.

The two buses accelerated but the minibus could not keep up, she said. When the Opel came abreast of the minibus, four men, their faces covered with checkered cotton masks, began firing at the tires.

"Without thinking, I hid my head under the seat," Ibrahim said from her Baghdad hospital bed. "The driver kept speeding and the shooting continued. Then the driver got injured, and he swerved toward the wrong side of the road."

She said the attackers fled when they saw another car approaching. "When it became silent, I shouted to the people who gathered around," she said.

Ibrahim said three women immediately and a fourth was mortally wounded. Police confirmed the death toll.

Ibrahim said she started working at Habaniyah two months ago because she needed the money. Unemployment in Iraq runs between 50 and 60 percent.

"I won't continue this work. I am afraid. They wanted to kill us all," she said.

Relatives of the dead said they realized they were at risk by working for the Americans.

"But it is a question of money," said Seita Noubar, 48, whose sister Sona was among the dead. "What can we do? She just wanted to earn a living."

Of the attackers, Noubar said: "If they were real men, they would have gone after men and fought Americans with tanks, not poor women."

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Iraq not ready for direct democracy, warn Catholic observers

Archbishop Sako and Caritas-Germany Aide Voice Concerns

[Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org) (21.01.2004) / HRWF Int. (26.01.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email info@hrwf.net -- Catholic representatives say the Iraqis are not ready for the exercise of democracy and need help from abroad. Chaldean Archbishop Louis Sako of Kirkuk, 56, was one voice that cautioned against elections too soon. He was commenting on the statements of Shiite Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, a "person who is esteemed by everyone," the archbishop said.

"But we have to be realistic: His request to hold elections in two months is impossible," Archbishop Sako said. "One must be content with what can be done. The Iraqi people are still not prepared; they must be prepared. They must learn to respect and accept the other. All this cannot be done in one or two days."

"Behind these impossible requests are foreign pressures, which do not take into account the internal situation and the real needs of the people," the archbishop added.

Noting the difficult economic situation and the lack of services endured by a people "no longer satisfied with promises," the archbishop appealed for help from the international community, especially Arab countries.

This week, Karl Amman, the representative of Caritas-Germany in Iraq, is in the Vatican, to participate in the meeting of the Assembly of Organizations for Aid to the Eastern Churches (ROACO), an institution guided by the Holy See that intends to help Catholics in that country.

In statements on Vatican Radio, Amman also expressed his bewilderment over the proposal to hold direct elections.

Should elections take place, he said, "there is the possibility that a secular government will come to power; or, also, there could be a majority of Muslim votes, favoring a legislature shaped by the Muslim Shariah," or Islamic law.

Amman said that the local Church "requests that the international community do all it can to ensure that the economic and political development of Iraq be at the service of all the ethnic and religious groups" of the country.

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