

3,000 Christians Flee Iraq

At least 13 people have been killed this month in a wave of concerted attacks against Christians in Mosul.



[] More than 3,000 Iraqi Christians have fled the northern city of Mosul in the face of a new wave of attacks against the minority religious community.

At least a dozen Christians were killed in October alone, the latest being Christian music-store owner Farques Batool, who was gunned down at work Sunday, according to the Associated Press (AP). His teenage nephew also was injured in the attack.

No one has claimed responsibility for the attacks, which have left Mosul neighborhoods littered with the remnants of bombed homes. But local leaders blame al-Qaida in Iraq, which remains influential despite the surge of U.S. troops in May.

"We are the target of a campaign of liquidation, a campaign of violence," Chaldean church leader Louis Sako said, according to the AP. "The objective is political."

Many Iraqi Christians left with just the clothes on their backs to take refuge in the mostly Christian villages of Nineveh Plain. Others are crossing the border into Syria or Turkey. Observers say the flight has

created
significant humanitarian needs.

"We left everything behind us. We took only our souls," said Ni'ma Noail, 50, according to the Barnabus Fund. Noail is now living in a church.

Mosul is home to one of the world's oldest Christian communities. Its Christian population is second only to Baghdad. "The fact that Christians are now being attacked in the heartland of Christianity is very significant," said Canon Andrew White, the Anglican leader of St. George's church in Baghdad. "This is the place where the people have believed in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for 2,700 years. ... These are our brothers and sisters, and we must not forget them."

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki ordered an investigation into the organized attacks and has vowed to protect Christians. Responding to the violence, police sent 2,500 additional troops into Mosul, the AP said. Yet Iraqi Christians say they don't know how long it will be before they feel safe enough to return to their homes.

The exodus of Christians follows the Iraqi Parliament's decision to remove Article 50 from its new provincial election law, which would have reserved seats on provincial councils for Christians and other religious minorities. Many Christian leaders feared the clause's removal would leave minority groups unprotected from discrimination and harassment.

The violence is the worst against Christians since 2003, when the Iraq War began and Islamic extremists began attacking Christians and other minority communities, forcing tens of thousands to flee the nation. Today the number of Christians in the nation has dwindled from 800,000 in 2003 to roughly 100,000.

The Assyrian Aid Society, which is assisting displaced Christians with food and other aid, reported that leaflets are being distributed telling Christians they must leave Mosul or face death. The organization has asked for help aiding the refugees, saying the number of fleeing families is increasing by the hour, and a humanitarian crisis is "imminent."

Ken Joseph Jr., director of , hopes Iraqi Christians will not leave the nation for good as a result of the violence. He said Christians are desperately needed in the Middle East. "Assyrians were the first group of people to accept the gospel, and they took the gospel to ... the world," he said.

Because Assyrian Christianity has such ancient roots, doors have opened to Assyrian missionaries in nations such as China, which severely limits religious freedom but allows entry to what it considers historic religions, Joseph said. "I think what the devil is trying to do is destroy this little group," he told *Charisma*, "because they have the key for reaching these tough nations."

—**Adrienne S. Gaines**