

Christian Businessman Killed in Iraq

The execution-style murder in Mosul has renewed concern about violence against the religious minority ahead of provincial elections on Jan. 31.

✖[] A Christian businessman was killed execution-style in Iraq on Thursday, renewing concern about anti-Christian violence that saw thousands flee the area last fall.

The 36-year-old man, who owned an auto repair shop in Mosul, was shot in the head several times, police told the Associated Press (AP) on Saturday. No one took responsibility for the murder.

Another Christian, a city engineer, was kidnapped in early January but returned four days later when his family paid a \$50,000 ransom, according to the AP.

Bassem Balu, an official with the Democratic Assyrian Movement, the largest Christian party in Iraq, said he did not think the violence would slow the return of Christians to northern Iraq, where more than a dozen Christians were killed in October. But he said he hoped the attack did not signal renewed violence against the religious minority, according to the AP.

The Assyrian International News Agency said groups linked to al-Qaeda are operating in the area, destroying Christians' homes and properties, harassing them with letters, abductions and attacks, and even killing some. The organization said the "hate campaign" is intended to drive Christians out of the area.

Despite government assistance to return to northern Iraq, many Christians remain with relatives in the countryside or across the border in Syria. Because of the violence, Christian candidates in the Jan. 31 provincial election are not posting

fliers in Mosul and are campaigning in mostly Christian areas outside the city, the AP reported. The election is aimed at ending support for the insurgency and dividing power more equitably.

Since violence against Christians escalated in 2003 after the start of the Iraq War, the Christian population has lost half of its population of roughly 1 million.