

Christians Flee Iraq in Wake of Concerted Attacks

Thousands of Iraqi Christians fled the northern city of Mosul in October in the face of concerted attacks against the minority religious community.

At press time, no one had claimed responsibility for the violence that caused at least 13,000 Christians to flee Mosul neighborhoods that were littered with the remnants of bombed churches and homes. At least a dozen Christians were killed in the first two weeks of October, including a Christian music-store owner who was gunned down at the business Oct. 12, the Associated Press reported. The man's teenage nephew also was injured in the attack.

Local leaders alternately blamed al-Qaida in Iraq, Kurdish political factions and Sunni extremists. Observers also note that 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 leaders feared the clause's removal would leave minority groups unprotected from discrimination and harassment.

Many Christians left Mosul with just the clothes on their backs to take refuge in the villages of Nineveh Plain. Others are crossing the border into Syria or Turkey. "We left everything behind us. We took only our souls," said Ni'ma Noail, 50, according to the Barnabus Fund, which is raising funds to assist Iraqi refugees.

Both Muslim and international Christian leaders have condemned the violence against one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. The U.S. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki

ordered an investigation into the attacks, promising to protect Christians. Yet Iraqi believers, also known as Assyrian or Chaldean Christians, say they don't know how long it will be before they feel safe enough to return to their homes. "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. "These are our brothers and sisters, and we must not forget them."

In late October, the U.N. High Commissioner on Refugees began sending aid to Iraqi Christians who fled Mosul, which has the second-largest Christian population in Iraq. The violence is the worst against Christians since 2004, when attacks by Islamic extremists forced some 40,000 Iraqi Christians to flee the nation. Though he recognizes the current danger, Ken Joseph Jr., director of , hopes Christians will not leave Iraq for good. 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. "I think what the devil is trying to do is destroy this little group because they have the key for reaching these tough nations."