

Relief Workers Remain on Alert in Iraq

Christian aid ministries working inside the country take precautions against threat of attack

The capture of Saddam Hussein in early December may have been cause for rejoicing for many Iraqis, but the jubilant mood was short-lived for foreign relief workers, including Christians who are helping to rebuild the country.

“Since the capture of Saddam, we have received one report that terrorist activities are being planned for northern Iraq,” said World Relief Disaster Relief Desk Officer Brandon Pustejovsky, who witnessed the celebration in that area on the day of the capture. “I wish the news was better, but I think we are dealing with issues of pride, religion and family, which extend beyond the influence of a mere man.”

Pustejovsky was the only non-Iraqi working for the agency in Iraq until just before Christmas, when he returned to the United States. World Relief’s 11 Iraqi employees are continuing to work under the auspices of Mission East. That group is one of several Christian relief organizations that carried on with their efforts long after hundreds of secular nongovernmental organizations left the country following the August bombing of United Nations offices in Baghdad and attacks on “softer” targets, including aid workers.

Those who remain face daily uncertainty about their safety. “The danger and the problem there is that it’s so unstable,” said Judy Moore, who is based in Albania but serves as World Vision’s interim operations director for Iraq. “One day will be fine, and the next day people will be killed. Every time

you go out, you don't know whether you will be attacked or you will be safe."

As an added precaution, members of the World Vision team placed the agency's identifiable vehicles in storage, avoided wearing apparel bearing the World Vision logo and stopped keeping a routine schedule. In addition, the organization has declined requests from network TV news agencies to accompany the staff and cover the work they do.

"It's tough to turn down, but we always put the safety of our staff first," said Dean Owen, World Vision's public relations director.

Like World Vision, other Christian agencies that have chosen to stay try to keep their workers as safe as possible by maintaining a low profile. When Samaritan's Purse realized in October that it could no longer guarantee the safety of its workers—or successfully continue its operations in Iraq—the organization called a 90-day hiatus and pulled its workers out of the country.

"The mainstream media accused us of offering aid just so we could distribute Bibles and only going over there to help Christians. It was crazy," said Samaritan's Purse International Projects Director Ken Isaacs. "No one came to see what we were doing. They compromised us and put us in a high-profile position."

Still, the work continues. Under the agency's direction Iraqi Christians feed 1,000 families a month and provide other means of financial and material support. And an existing Baghdad hospital and a partly built clinic completed by Samaritan's

Purse continue to make good use of the 16 tons of medical equipment donated through the organization last year.

Though some churches have been threatened, Isaacs does not believe faith is the primary motive for the persistent danger in the country. "Iraq is a fairly secular Islamic country. If they attack a church it's because they want a juicier target," he said. "This is about power and force and evil, and the terror is being exercised to scare the Iraqis. It's all about chaos and destabilizing everything."

But neither the United States nor most Christian agencies have given up their efforts to stabilize the country, despite negative reports that reach Americans, Isaacs said. The U.S. government kept the food pipeline flowing, he said, while reports of problems such as power outages were exaggerated and failed to tell the full story.

Electricity was quickly restored after the war, but the sudden availability of consumer goods such as appliances created an overload on the country's antiquated electrical grid.

"The problems have less to do with the war and more to do with bringing the country up to the 21st century," he said.

To many Iraqis, whatever chaos exists today is minuscule compared with the overt persecution the people—including Christians—faced under Hussein's regime. "Before the war, churches in Iraq were persecuted just as Islam was," World Relief President Clive Calver told Charisma. "Christians were shot, churches and bookstores were bombed, people were thrown in jail. When I went to Iraq immediately after the conflict, church after church asked me to please thank the Americans and

their brothers and sisters [in Christ] for giving them their freedom.”

World Relief suffered a personal loss in September when a church leader in Iraq who worked with the agency was killed in a land-mine accident. At least one worker has been shot at, though it’s not clear whether the shooting was random or related to the relief work.

World Vision has not lost any workers in Iraq, but the agency—with 20,000 workers worldwide—loses about one worker per year. “We work in very dangerous places, and Iraq is now near if not at the top of the list,” Owen said. “We are monitoring the situation very carefully and will continue to do so until the situation improves and we don’t have to be so vigilant.”

Security is such a high priority for World Vision that the organization offers an intensive and comprehensive five-day course on security issues for its own staff and for that of other aid agencies, as well as for journalists who work in dangerous areas.

Despite the daily threat of danger, all three agencies say they have seen such an outpouring of love and faith among the Iraqi Christians that they can’t help but believe that God is at work in the country. The Iraqi people remain hopeful, Calver said, that a just government will be established—in spite of lingering concern that fundamentalist Muslims will end up in power.

Said Calver: “This is their message to the [United States]: ‘You won the war, now make sure you win the peace.’”

Marcia Ford