

# Violence Escalates in Iraq Ahead of Elections

✖ Political tensions ahead of parliamentary elections in Iraq on Sunday have left at least eight Chaldean Christians dead in the last three weeks and hundreds of families fleeing Mosul.

“The concern of Christians in Mosul is growing in the face of what is happening in the city,” said Chaldean Archbishop of Kirkuk Louis Sako. “The tension and struggle between political forces is creating an atmosphere of chaos and congestion. Christians are victims of political tension between political groups, but maybe also by fundamentalist sectarian cleansing.”

On Feb. 23 the killing of Eshoe Marokee, a Christian, and his two sons in their home in front of other family members sent shock waves across the Christian community. The murder took place amid a string of murders that triggered the mass exodus of families to the surrounding towns and provinces.

“It is not the first time Christians are attacked or killed,” said the archbishop of the Syrian Catholic Church in Mosul, Georges Casmoussa. “The new [element] in this question is to be killed in their own homes.”

The capital of Nineveh Province some 250 miles northwest of Baghdad, Mosul has been known as the most dangerous city for Christians. At least 275 Assyrian Christians have been murdered by Islamic insurgents since 2003, according to a report prepared by the International Committee for The Rights of Indigenous Mesopotamians.

While in 2009 the organization listed 16 deaths, since January there have been at least 13 murders, eight of which took place the second half of February.

The movement of internally displaced persons to surrounding areas started in mid-February and tripled between Feb. 24 and Feb. 27 to about 683 families, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Although the rate of displacement into areas around Mosul has slowed, the report estimates that 720 families had fled the city as of March 1. This represents about 4,320 people.

## **Christian Students Affected**

The murders have not only driven families away from the cities but have also kept students away from university. Three of the Christians killed in February were university

students. As a result, around 2,000 Christian students are staying away from their classes until the tension in Mosul eases.

"We believe that the attack against these students was somehow related to the political situation in Mosul," said General Secretary of the Chaldo-Assyrian Student and Youth Union Kaldo Oghanna. "This has affected our people in Mosul badly, and they have left the university."

Oghanna said that the union has proposed that the Ministry of Education open a new university in a safer area of the Nineveh plains for the nearly 3,000 Christian undergraduate students and 250 graduate students studying in Mosul. He also said that they have appealed to the university's administration to make necessary exceptions for the Christian students who have not attended classes in the last few weeks.

Although some local Christian leaders say they expect the tension to ease after Sunday, security may not improve as the Christian community is caught in political tensions between Arabs and Kurds vying for control of the province. Archbishop Casmoussa said regardless of who is behind the murders, the Christian community demands justice.

"We urge the

Central and Regional Government to pursue the murders and their masters and judge them according to Iraqi laws, even if they are supported by religious or political parties," Casmoussa said. "Enough is enough. Are we to pay the price of political struggles or ambitions?"

Sako said that in other cities security has improved, and that Christians are eager to cast their votes.

The election on March 7 will decide the 325 members of the Council of Representatives of Iraq, who will then elect the prime minister and president of Iraq.

Of these seats, five are reserved for the nation's Christian minority, estimated at around 600,000. Most of them live in the Nineveh plain.

At the beginning of the Iraq war, there were about 1.2 million Christians living in Iraq. Iraq's population is roughly 30 million.