

Could Removing US Troops Increase Christian Persecution in Afghanistan?

✖ President Barack Obama is bringing home 33,000 troops from Afghanistan within the next 15 months.

The removal of the surge forces leaves just under 70,000 troops in Afghanistan. While President Hamid Karzai welcomed the announcement, it was greeted with less enthusiasm and plenty of skepticism elsewhere. Todd Nettleton, a spokesman for Voice of the Martyrs USA, agrees. "There is not a great deal of confidence in the Afghan security forces to protect religious freedom."

Although President Obama declared that 'the tide of war is receding,' pulling out while the Taliban is still alive and well can only bring trouble. The U.S. scenario bears a resemblance to Russia's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989.

At that time, a believer told Nettleton that their struggle was just beginning. "'The Taliban has shaved their beards, and they've taken off their black turbans, but they're still here.'" Unopposed, there are concerns that the Taliban will quickly grow back to full strength.

Nettleton hopes that threat won't materialize for today's Christians, who make up just 1/100 of 1 percent of the population. However, "There is all likelihood that there will continue to be persecution of Christians; there will continue to be Christians who will be laying down their lives because of their faith."

Humanitarian groups worry that the drawdown will bring civil war, religious persecution and increased terrorism. Left unchecked, the Taliban could declare open war on Christians.

Nettleton says, "Their interpretation of being a devout Muslim means that they should attack Christians, that a person who leaves Islam is an apostate and deserves to be killed."

There's already evidence of that view gaining momentum. Days prior to the announcement, Afghan militants released a video showing the gruesome beheading of a Christian in Herat Province.

Believers have few places of refuge left. Neighboring countries have their own problems with anti-Christian sentiments and terrorism. Nettleton acknowledges the normal fear that accompanies such changes. "We can pray for our Afghan brothers and sisters that they will have confidence in Christ, that they will have that eternal perspective and not live in a state of fear and panic," he says.

Nettleton also says that "one of the things to remember is that security comes ultimately from Christ, it comes ultimately from God. It's not from U.S. troops, from a gun, or from a big fence around our houses."

Voice of the Martyrs USA is standing in solidarity with the persecuted church in Afghanistan. "We have contacts within the Afghan church that we provide assistance to. We provide Scriptures and other forms of assistance, but it is very much an underground presence."

Pray that Christians in Afghanistan will stand strong in their faith and reach out to their neighbors, despite their small numbers. Pray for a peaceful transition and for increased religious freedom.