

Iraqi Pastor Released After Near-Death Imprisonment

World Compassion Terry Law Ministries has been working in Iraq since January 2003. We were in Baghdad Dec. 13, 2003, when Saddam was captured. The rounds of gunfire that exploded when the news was heard made me think we may be in the middle of a revolution.

Our work in Kurdistan, Iraq, has been primarily of a humanitarian nature. Since 2005, we and our partners have invested \$2,536,937 in the country for medicine, clothing, shoes, backpacks, school supplies, Bibles and *The Story of Jesus* booklets, as well as training and evangelism efforts.

It is our ministry policy to share our faith in Jesus at every juncture possible in the countries in which we work.

It was on one of our humanitarian trips to Kurdistan in 2010 that Pastor Jamal (Abdi Ali Hamzah) guided us to villages near the northern town of Dahuk. We also traveled near the very dangerous town of Mosul. I remember a small orphanage of about 50 children—over 1,000 children in the area had lost one or both parents to the violence of al-Qaida. I asked Pastor Jamal why one little girl wouldn't wear her shoes. He asked her, and she said, "I've never had a new pair of shoes before. I don't want to get them dirty." We went to several villages on that trip distributing food, shoes and Bibles.

We soon realized on that trip that Pastor Jamal was subject to severe headaches. We were able to send him to a hospital in Amman, Jordan, where he received treatment for tumors on his brain.

Eight months after his release from the hospital and return to Kurdistan, the police came to his house and detained him on July 6, 2011. There were no charges for 14 months of his

imprisonment. In September, he was tried and convicted for being a spy for Iran.

U.S. Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma is the ranking Republican member on the Arms Services Committee. He is well-liked by Oklahomans. Inhofe agreed to write a letter to Kurdistan's Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani on Oct. 18, requesting Jamal's release on the humanitarian basis of his failing health. The letter was sent by diplomatic means, but for reasons unknown to us, the letter was never received by Prime Minister Barzani.

In early January, I realized I must go over to Iraq to plead directly for Jamal's release. Inhofe graciously wrote a second letter to the prime minister. I was carrying a duplicate copy. The original had been sent ahead of our arrival. Again, the original letter was never received by the prime minister—it had disappeared. My associate, Joel Vesanen, and I were stumped. What to do?

Before leaving Tulsa, Okla., Joel Starr, Sen. Inhofe's legislative assistant, contacted U.S. Consul General Paul Sutphin in Erbil, Iraq, who proved to be a great help to us there. We met with his staff and told our story, and the consul general said, "I will call Karim Sinjari [the minister of the interior]. He is the one who will get things done." Sinjari tried to decline but finally agreed to a 10-minute appointment.

The minister of foreign relations, Falah Mustafa Bakir, opened the door for my associate and I to see Jamal in prison. Pastor Jamal didn't know we were there. When he walked into the warden's office and saw us, he came running and crying, "Terry Law, Terry Law, you come back, you come back." It was an intensely emotional moment for me.

We sat and talked in the warden's office. Jamal was holding his head because the pain was severe. He wept as he talked

with us.

The next morning, my associate, Joel, and I had an appointment with Sinjari. I presented Inhofe's letter requesting the release of Jamal on humanitarian grounds. I outlined World Compassion's work in Iraq over the last 10 years.

Our appeal to Sinjari was not based on Jamal's guilt or innocence—it was based purely on humanitarian grounds because of Pastor Jamal's failing health. My heart sank when the minister said, "It is impossible to release him. He has been tried and convicted in our courts, and we will not retry the case. But in our new constitution, we have something called 'private amnesty.' It would be a presidential pardon only if President Massoud Barzani would be willing to sign it."

I asked where the president was.

"He is in Moscow, talking with Putin's government," Sinjari stated. And then he gave me hope. "I will make sure that this request will go straight to his desk upon his return."

As you can imagine, this filled Joel and me with great excitement. What an honor to have received this assurance by the minister of the interior!

Waiting for the presidential pardon was excruciating. I knew Barzani to be a devout Muslim. I don't think there is precedent for a former Muslim, converted to Christianity and proselytizing other Muslims, now convicted of a crime in an Iraqi court, to be released by "private amnesty." The odds against it were huge!

On April 4, we received an email from Sinjari himself, saying Pastor Jamal had been released from prison in Dahuk at 3:30 p.m., almost 21 months after his initial imprisonment. Jamal's youngest son, who hadn't seen his dad during his time in prison, cried for an hour. His wife and other children were overwhelmed with great joy.

Stephen Gee at the U.S. consul general's office stated, "We've never seen anything happen this fast in Kurdistan."

I called a church in Canada where I grew up and told the pastor we needed funds to cover the airfare for Pastor Jamal, his wife, their three sons, our Iraq director, Nabil Omeish, and myself. He called me back an hour later, after talking to the members of the board. It was unanimous: "Yes."

I was on the next flight to Europe. I called Nabil from London but didn't realize Pastor Jamal would be sitting beside him. He gave Jamal the phone. Jamal said, "Terry Law," and began to sob. Nabil gently took the phone from him. I flew on to my final destination in Europe. I will never forget standing in the arrivals hall of a European city when a waving, happy Jamal, his wife, three boys and Nabil came to embrace me. Nabil said, "We did it. We did it."

"Yes", I replied. "It was the grace of God."

Jamal is rehabbing in a safe place, where he's receiving help in dealing with prison trauma. He has been examined by a doctor, who also consulted with two neurosurgeons for further diagnosis related to the tumor. They stated the tumor has not returned, but Jamal cysts that are causing severe headaches. It was recommended by the doctor for him to be evaluated again in three to six months.

Jamal and his family are being well taken care of. We all celebrated my 70th birthday on April 8. Jamal's release was the best birthday gift I could have received!

I called my associate, Joel, in Tulsa to suggest he send an email to Minister Sinjari to say thank you and that I would be willing to return to Kurdistan to say a personal thank you. Sinjari emailed back, and Nabil and I were on a crowded flight that night. We were met by five of Sinjari's body guards, escorted to a white Land Cruiser and taken to the most expensive hotel in Erbil. The government was very gracious and

accommodating to us.

The next day, Sinjari came to our hotel. We talked for 2 1/2 hours, discussing many political realities that I am not at liberty to mention. He reiterated, "We, the Kurds, are America's success story in Iraq." He's right—Kurdistan has been totally rebuilt in the 10 years I have been going there.

According to a recent statement made by the government of Kurdistan, "These are unique times in Kurdistan, and the development is moving forward at breakneck speed. This is true in terms of business, infrastructure and the visible signs of growth, but also in the more nuanced institutionalization of the rights and freedoms taken for granted in the West. Visitors to the Kurdistan Region are fairly unanimous in their reaction—incredulity. Some ask with surprise, 'Is this Iraq?' Others question, 'How come no one is talking about what is happening in Kurdistan?' The pace of progress in Kurdistan over the last decade surely must rival that of any other place in the world. It is safe, it is secure and it is open for business and for visitors. The Kurdish Regional Government encourages everyone to come and see the region for themselves—a shining example of a tolerant, progressive, successful society from an era of darkness and oppression."

Then Minister Sinjari asked me a big question: "Will you tell our story in the West? We have released your Pastor Jamal. We have seen hundreds of Muslims become Christians. We will protect the right of any Kurd to choose another faith." Then he said, "I want you to meet the prime minister tomorrow. Will you stay one more day?"

Nabil and I both agreed.

In my meeting with Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, he expressed the following:

- We welcome Christian people here. We will protect them from violence.

- The West is safe here. Bring your business leaders, your educators—we must catch up with the West.
- We will *not* allow extreme Islam.
- I will write a personal letter to United States Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma, inviting him to Kurdistan.

We would like to thank all those who have prayed around the world for Pastor Jamal's release from prison. God has graciously and miraculously answered our prayers. We are humbled and grateful.

Terry Law is the founder and president of World Compassion Terry Law Ministries. For over 40 years, he has traveled to countries that are "hostile" to the gospel, ministering to the lost and hurting in places such as the former Soviet Union, Cuba and North Korea.