

# Amnesty Calls on Iraq to Protect Christians

Is the Iraqi government doing enough to protect the country's Christian minority from an expected spike in violent attacks as they prepare to celebrate Christmas? Amnesty International doesn't think so. The group is calling on the government to do more.

"Attacks on Christians and their churches by armed groups have intensified in past weeks and have clearly included war crimes," says Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International director for the Middle East and North Africa. "We fear that militants are likely to attempt serious attacks against Christians during the Christmas period for maximum publicity and to embarrass the government."

Amnesty International has cause to be concerned. Last year armed groups carried out fatal bomb attacks on churches in Mosul on Dec. 15 and Dec. 23. Some 65 attacks on Christian churches in Iraq were recorded between mid-2004 and the end of 2009.

The increase in violence against Christians in the last month takes place against a backdrop of sectarian violence in Iraq, including several bomb attacks on Shia gatherings last week during the Ashura period, which have reportedly killed more than a dozen people.

In fact, attacks have increased since about 100 worshippers were taken hostage in a Baghdad Assyrian Catholic church by an armed group on Oct. 31, with more than 40 people killed as Iraqi security forces tried to free the hostages, Amnesty reports. The Islamic State of Iraq, an armed group linked to al-Qaida, claimed responsibility for the attack.

Following the hostage crisis, Christian families in Baghdad

have been subjected to increasing bomb and rocket attacks on their homes, as well as systematic threats in the mail or by text message, Amnesty reports. Dozens of Christian families have fled Baghdad, Mosul and Basra and have sought refuge in the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

The summary, released by the Barnabas Fund, says that Iraqi Christians in threatened cities like Mosul "are living behind locked doors. They are compelled to take long leaves of absence from work, in Mosul and other cities, as a result of the dangers they face at work. The universities are almost empty of Christian students, as are the schools."

According to media reports, as Christmas approaches the Iraqi authorities have started constructing concrete walls to protect Mosul and Baghdad churches from security threats, and are introducing stringent security checks at their entrances. Religious services have been scaled back due to fear of attacks.

"Building walls around churches is a sign that the government has failed to provide real security," Smart says. "Now that Iraq is finally forming a government, that new government's effectiveness will be measured by whether it achieves an actual reduction in sectarian attacks by armed groups, and helps stem the flood of Christians fleeing Iraq to escape the violence."