

Blast Near Church in Kirkuk, Iraq, Injures 13

A car blast outside a Syrian Catholic church in Kirkuk, Iraq, Tuesday morning left 13 wounded as police located and disarmed two more car bombs targeting churches in the city, according to area sources.

Online video images of the attack against the Holy Family Church showed one of its walls blasted open and all its surfaces covered with broken glass, rubble and dust from the entrance where the explosion took place to the sanctuary on the far end of the building. The explosion occurred on the second day of the month-long Muslim fasting period of Ramadan.

Nearby houses in one of Kirkuk's oldest quarters, where Muslims and Christians had lived together peacefully, were seriously damaged, and cars on the street were left in twisted piles of metal. Shattered glass wounded 13 residents as they slept, area sources said.

"We are sad because this is nonsense, and people are discouraged," the archbishop of Kirkuk, Monsignor Louis Sako, told Compass. "We try to encourage them and give them hope. We have asked the mayor-governor to help the families that lost their houses and cars before thinking to restore the church."

Today all but one of the wounded residents in the church's neighborhood—an elderly man who was seriously injured—reportedly had been released from the hospital. The Rev. Imad Yalda, the parish priest, was in the church building at the time of the blast and was also slightly wounded.

Though Yalda and the community were sad about yesterday's events, a local pastor who requested anonymity told Compass such attacks have become a normal part of the lives of Christians in Iraq.

"He accepted what happened, but he was very sad for the building of his church," the pastor said. "But this has become ordinary for us, and we expect that any minute something will happen here. When you are living in this situation, you are used to accept what is happening."

No terrorist or extremist group has taken responsibility for yesterday's attack in Kirkuk, and local church leaders said it seems Christians in Iraq are trapped in a senseless game of power and intimidation.

"Sometimes we feel there is some pressure over the Christians all over Iraq to make them leave their cities and go to the northern part of Iraq, to Kurdistan," said the pastor, "but who knows? I can't say those who did this want us to leave our city."

Sako said the perpetrators, whether they are Islamic extremists with anti-Christian motives or terrorists with political motives, are trying to create an atmosphere of confusion by attacking Christians during the Muslim holy month of fasting, Ramadan.

"They are using this to shock people," said Sako. "They are getting the attention of politicians in Kirkuk and in Iraq and saying, 'We are here and powerful, and we can do whatever we want.' It's just confusing-[they want to] say they are here and create a chaotic situation and make a panic among the people."

Car Bombs Defused

Authorities also located two other cars full of explosives in the area. One was parked in front of the church building of Mar Gourgis, of the Assyrian Church of the East. A school is located next to the church building.

Another vehicle packed with explosives was parked in front of a Protestant church in the neighborhood. When the church pastor and others in the neighborhood heard the blast at the

Holy Family Church at 5:30 a.m., they came out to see what had happened.

In front of the Protestant Church complex they saw a suspicious car filled with containers of gas. Before noon, special forces confirmed the car was full of explosives and disarmed it. In the process there was a small explosion that broke 21 windows of the church complex.

Kirkuk's Christian leaders said they fear more Christians will decide to migrate abroad after this attack. The Protestant church that was targeted yesterday has 70 members, of which nine will be leaving the country in the next two months, according to its leaders. Yet they hope that Christians will remain in Iraq.

"We continue to witness to Jesus Christ and our Christian values; we are not afraid," Sako said.

Kirkuk, 250 kilometers (155 miles) north of Baghdad, is a culturally diverse city with about 10,000 Christians.

There have been at least 45 abductions in Kirkuk since the start of the year, with most victims coming from well-to-do families, Agence-France Presse (AFP) reported last month.

A special report prepared for U.S. Congress last month stated that Iraq's security is declining and is less safe than it was a year ago.

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AFP also reported that June was the deadliest month in Iraq so far this year, with 271 people killed in attacks according to a government count.

A Baghdad court found four men guilty of "planning and preparing" an attack on the Syrian Catholic Church of Our Lady of Salvation last October in which 58 people were killed. The judge handed three perpetrators the death sentence and a 20-

year jail term to another, according to The Associated Press. The men, whose names authorities did not release, have one month to appeal.

Last year's attack was the deadliest one against the country's Christians since Islamic extremists began targeting them in 2003. On Oct. 31, during evening mass, al-Qaida suicide bombers stormed the church building and held some 100 worshipers hostage for hours after detonating bombs in the neighborhood and gunning down two area policemen.

The militants sprayed the sanctuary with bullets and ordered a priest to call the Vatican to demand the release of Muslim women whom they claimed were held hostage by the Coptic Church in Egypt. When security forces stormed the building, the assailants started to kill hostages and eventually blew themselves up.

It is estimated that more than 50 percent of Iraq's Christian community has fled the country since 2003. There are nearly 600,000 Christians left in Iraq.