

Christians Killed in Northern Iraq



At least four Christians have been killed in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul since Sunday ahead of elections on March 7.

Christian student Wissam George, 20, was found dead on a Mosul residential street Wednesday afternoon, Agence France Presse (AFP) reported. His body was riddled with bullets.

On Tuesday, a gunman killed Zia Toma, a 21-year-old engineering student, and injured 22-year-old pharmacy student Ramsin Shmael. The previous day greengrocer Fatukhi Munir was killed inside his shop in a drive-by shooting, and on Sunday armed assailants shot Chaldean Christian Rayan Salem Elias outside his home.

“What can we say?” Bishop Shlemon Warduni, the second-most-senior Chaldean bishop in Iraq, told AFP. “We are very sad. The government is looking at what is going on, it is speaking, but doing nothing.”

In November, Human Rights Watch warned that minorities in northern Iraq, including Christians, were the victims in an ongoing conflict between Arabs and Kurds over control of the northern regions.

In 2008, a systematic campaign of anti-Christian violence left roughly 40 Christians dead and forced 10,000 to flee their homes in Mosul, now home to between 2,000 and 3,000 Christians.

“For years Christians have been targeted in Mosul and the surrounding area,” said Carl Moeller, president of Open Doors, which advocates for persecuted Christians worldwide. “It is

one of the most violent areas in Iraq. With the parliamentary elections coming up March 7, more violence against Christians is expected.”

Iraq’s Christian minority is often targeted before elections, which are viewed as a key test of reconciliation in a nation that has been plagued by sectarian violence since the Iraq War began in 2003.

“The Christian minority has become an issue in the elections, as it always is before elections,” said Hazem Girgis, a deacon at a Syrian Orthodox church in Mosul, according to AFP. “We are terrified ... and the security forces are not able to offer us any security.”

In a statement released Tuesday, Moeller called on Christians to pray for Iraqi believers.

“With Iran and Afghanistan taking the spotlight, we must not forget our fellow believers in Iraq,” he said. “Pray that the violence will end and those families who have lost love ones will receive the comfort from the Great Comforter.”

On Friday, Open Doors reported that at least 50 Christian families had fled their homes in Mosul.