

Christians Endangered Species in Iraq

“If this exodus is not stopped, Iraq will not have any Christians left in three years.” So says Steve, an under cover field worker for Open Doors in the Muslim-dominated country.

Since the al-Qaeda-linked massacre that killed almost 60 Christians at Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad on Oct. 31, 2010, an estimated 45,000 to 95,000 Christians have left the country. Sources have told Open Doors that only an estimated 250,000 to 300,000 Christians remain in the country. Many sources reported that in 1991 Christians in Iraq numbered around 850,000, including those living in the Kurdish region. In 2003 the number dropped to 550,000 and in early 2010 there were 345,000.

“Due to killings, attacks and threats, many Christians have lost relatives and have become so afraid that they have left Iraq for such countries as Syria, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan or for countries in the West,” says Steve.

As a result of the increase in violence against Christians, Iraq moved to No. 8 from No. 17 on this year’s Open Doors World Watch List of the worst persecutors of Christians. That was the largest increase of any of the 50 countries on the list.

Dr. Carl Moeller, Open Doors USA President/CEO, labels the attacks against Christians in Iraq as “religicide.” “Christians in Baghdad and Mosul are gripped by terrorism,” Moeller says. “They are fleeing in droves. Their families are threatened. Even young children are being killed. Extremists want to eliminate Christians from Iraq.

“The ‘religicide’ of Christians holds disturbing parallels to a previous effort to eliminate Iraqi Jews in 1948. Many Jews

fled and today virtually nothing remains of the once-vibrant community. People of all faiths must unite to prevent this from happening again. We must fight for freedom of religion for all imperiled faith groups in Iraq.”

Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein, the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s Director of Interfaith Relations, says Christians today are the largest group in the world facing life-threatening religious persecution. As he sees it, this should concern all fair-minded people, for two reasons.

“First, because it is the right thing to do. People are dying, and we can do something about it. Second, because events around us show that we can not afford to deal with regimes that will not provide basic liberties, and the extent to which a government guarantees religious freedom to minorities remains the best test of its commitment.

“We have it within our power to produce a groundswell of international support for what should be an obvious right: that when a person leaves home on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday for a house of worship, he or she should expect to arrive back home safe and unmolested.”

Open Doors USA is requesting people to sign a petition to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The petition asks her to work with the Iraqi government to immediately form and implement a comprehensive plan of action to protect the vulnerable community of Christians and other religious minorities in Iraq.

To sign the petition, go to Open Doors USA Advocacy Director Lindsay Vessey reports that the advocacy department has already faxed over 10,000 signatures on the petition to the International Religious Freedom office at the State Department. She also sent a letter from Moeller urging protection for persecuted Christians in Iraq.