

# Christians in Biblical Homeland on the Verge of Complete Extinction

Before ISIS swept across the Nineveh Plains in the summer of 2014, driving more than 100,000 Christians into exile in Kurdistan, some 5,000 Syriac-Catholic families made their homes on ancient ancestral land in the town of Quaraqosh.

More than half of those families have school-age children, and international agencies have repaired the damage done to schools suffered during the ISIS occupation. The schools are ready to welcome the children to the new academic year. But the great challenge is that many of the families' homes still await repair or rebuilding.

Syriac-Catholic Father Georges Jahola, who represents his church on the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee (NRC), put it bluntly in an interview with international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN): "if their homes are not ready for families to move back in by September and the start of the school year, many of the Christians might well decide to go elsewhere—this time leaving Iraq for good."

To-date, 600 families have been able to move back into their homes in Qaraqosh; ACN helped establish the NRC so that the Syriac-Catholic, Syriac-Orthodox and the Chaldean churches could join forces in paving the way for the return of Christians to the nine major Christian towns on the Nineveh Plains. ACN has funded the repair of close to 160 homes to date. Overall numbers remain dangerously low; for example, in the town of Bartella, just 24 Syriac-Orthodox families have returned to their former homes, while more than 600 families have not been able or willing to make the move back to that community yet.

Close to 13,000 homes across the Nineveh Plains remain to be repaired or rebuilt, not to mention the major work that needs to be done throughout the region to restore the water and electricity supply. Meanwhile, some 90,000 Christians are still living as internally displaced persons in Kurdistan.

Beyond the work of reconstruction there are significant security concerns. ISIS may be largely ousted from Iraq, but Sunni-Shiite tension remains and may burst into renewed violence, putting Christians and other minorities in harm's way once again. There is also the risk that Baghdad and Kurdistan may clash on the Nineveh Plains if the Kurdish regional government declares its dependence and secedes from Iraq.

On the Nineveh Plains, schools beckon families and their children as does the prospect of new life marked by peace and stability. However, Western powers must make a major contribution to make the Christians' hopes a reality.

"Christians and other religious minorities count on the Western governments—and the U.S. in particular," ACNUSA Chairman George Marlin wrote last week, "not only to help fund the reconstruction of the Nineveh Plains, but also to use their powers and influence to get both Baghdad and Kurdistan to guarantee the security of all minorities and to ensure their equality of citizenship, including their property rights and freedom of worship.

Failing that, a dark history will repeat itself. "The West *must* act now," Marlin insisted, adding: "For if a significant number of Christians does not return to the Nineveh Plains very soon, and the power vacuum persists into 2018, the hopes for an enduring renaissance of Christianity in Iraq may be dashed forever." {eo}

*For more information, please write Joop Koopman at joop@ or call 917 608 1989.*