

Inside Embattled Syria: More Hostility Toward Christians

While much of the world's attention is focused on the Egyptian elections and American troops withdrawing from Iraq, the situation inside Syria is getting worse, especially for Christians.

There is unrest and chaos in Syria for various reasons. Some of those opposing the government want more freedom from a mistrusted and oppressive regime, while some religious opposition groups want freedom to rule and spread their Muslim faith by force and violence.

Christians, in general, are afraid of what might happen to them in the future, especially if fanatic Muslims take over or obtain more freedom and seek revenge against believers. Some Christians have already reported violent acts against them as a sign of more threats and violence to come.

"Christians inside Syria are caught in the crossfire as they are in many other Middle Eastern countries," says Open Doors president and CEO Dr. Carl Moeller. "Until the protests started against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, the Christian community enjoyed some protection. Now they are afraid of the future. Will they have to flee their country like Iraqi Christians have done over the last several years? Please lift them up in your prayers."

Because of months of protests and violence against the government of al-Assad, Syria is on the brink of civil war. Thousands of protesters have been killed. Because of the continued crackdown on the protests, there is an international boycott in place. Inside Syria the central government is losing its grip on the situation.

"Criminals, but also radical Muslims, are taking advantage of

that lawlessness,” says a field worker for Open Doors. “In the city of Homs, for example, the Sunni Muslims gained power on the streets when the government pulled out its troops for a few days. Some of the radical elements in this group have raided several churches. They robbed the churches of their most valuable things.”

More threatening is that several fundamentalist Muslim taxi drivers have made a vow that they will harm all women taking their taxis who are unveiled.

“These women, mostly less orthodox Muslims and Christians, are being kidnapped, raped or even killed,” says the field worker. “Some months ago two Christian women were kidnapped. One managed to jump out of the driving car, but the other was taken. That woman remains missing. This didn’t happen in a remote area of the country but in the capital of Damascus. For women the situation is unsafe now. People still go on with their daily routine, but with more caution.”

According to the worker, throughout Syria people can see the consequences of the boycott of the country:

“Petrol is running out, or being preserved or thrown out by opposing groups to create more of an issue within the country. You also see in the supermarkets that products are missing. Prices are rising because of the shortages. People stand in lines for hours just to get a tank of gasoline for heat; sometimes they go away empty. With electricity getting cut for few hours a day, no gasoline and no petrol are available as before.”

Some Christians are planning to escape Syria in case things get worse as they see the quality of life for them decrease and their rights decline. Syria has more than 20 million inhabitants. About 1.5 million Syrians are Christians. The 100,000 Iraqi Christians that fled to Syria because of the situation in their own country can be added to 1.5 million

figure.

Open Doors is helping the local churches in Syria by strengthening leadership. "We deliver Christian literature and provide leadership training. We also support Iraqi Christians that found refuge in the country," says the Open Doors worker.