

Insurgent Blast Ravages Church Building in Iraq

An insurgent blast left a church building in Kirkuk, Iraq, severely damaged on Monday in a second round of attacks against the city's Christian community in two weeks.

The bombing of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Mar Afram was the only attack against Christian targets amid a wave of violence that swept across Iraq yesterday, hitting 17 cities and claiming about 70 lives, according to The Associated Press.

An explosive device next to one of the church's walls exploded at 1:20 a.m. on Monday. Photos showed the bricks of one of the side walls strewn across the church floor and furniture, and one of the metal doors twisted open.

In two other separate attacks on Monday, insurgents placed deadly vehicle bombs in the center of Kirkuk, killing one and injuring four.

No Christians were killed in the attack against the church. Police announced higher protective measures for Kirkuk's churches, according to Alsumaria Iraqi Satellite TV Network.

On Aug. 2, insurgents targeted three churches in the city. Police discovered and disarmed a bomb near a Protestant church building and one by a Syriac Orthodox church. A third bomb exploded in front of the Holy Family Syriac Catholic Church, injuring 13 Muslims who lived nearby.

Abuna Gourgis Alyes, a priest at the Mar Afram church, told Compass that Monday's attack was the third and most devastating one against his church in the last five years. The church building suffered minor damage from bomb blasts in 2006 and 2008.

A Protestant pastor who requested anonymity spoke to Compass by phone as he stood in the rubble of Mar Afram on a visit to the Orthodox priest's church.

"Now I am here and seeing it with my own eyes," the pastor said, overwhelmed at the sight of the blown-out wall and wreckage. "They have to demolish the church and rebuild it."

The pastor's church building was also damaged in the Aug. 2 attack, as security forces tried to neutralize a car bomb parked in front of the church complex.

Alyes said no one was hurt in Monday's attack, but that he did not know how he would continue to perform mass for the church's 90 families. In a matter-of-fact voice, he said the greatest damage to the congregation is the fear that will surely drive more families out of town to the Kurdish part of Iraq or beyond the country's borders. Since January, 10 of Mar Afram's families have fled Kirkuk.

"Many will leave Kirkuk because of this explosion," Alyes said. "Many Christians take this event as an opportunity to make their decision to leave the city. I am sure many will leave after this."

According to Christian support organization Open Doors, there are 300,000 to 350,000 Christians left in Iraq, down from 1.2 million before the 2003 military operation in the country. The U.S. government plans to withdraw its troops from Iraq by the end of 2011.

Kirkuk and its surrounding towns belong to an oil-rich territory claimed by Kurdish and Arab administrations. For years authorities have postponed a referendum to determine which side would have the right to Kirkuk, an ethnically diverse city that includes Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen, including a small minority of Arab Christians.

The conflict over the city has put Christians in the cross-

fire of the opposing groups. A young Muslim Iraqi from Kirkuk's Turkmen community told Compass that Monday's unrest and the damage to the church is part of an effort to destabilize the country in an ongoing struggle for power.

"When Christians are targeted, they accuse extremists," said the Iraqi, who identified himself only as Kamal. "I think some people are trying to create unrest and destabilize the situation. We have Turkmen, Arabs, Kurds; there are many politicians who benefit from Kirkuk's instability."

He said Kirkuk is one of the hottest points of tension in the country, with all three groups – Turkmen, Arabs and Kurds – competing for control of the city. Article 140 of the Iraq's constitution states that the city's future will be determined based on a demographic majority of the population in a referendum.

"There are many groups trying to take Kirkuk to their territory," he said. "These attacks are mostly politically [rather] than terrorist motivated, so that Christians can leave the city so that it is left to other groups, who will also be targeted."

Christian journalist Emad Matty said the attacks in Kirkuk are part of a greater, politically motivated tactic to purge Arab-majority cities, including Baghdad and Mosul, of their Christian populations.

Asked how he thought Christians saw the attacks in Kirkuk this month, he said the predominant feeling was fear.

"It's like it was in Baghdad and Mosul: They are afraid and are under attack from unknown gunmen," said Matty, a freelance reporter. "There are political groups, and I don't want to say which ones, but there are groups who are targeting Christians for political reasons."

Alyes, who has lost a relative to the violence, said he would

not give up hoping for peace and stability in Iraq nor stop holding mass in the city. He asked Christians around the world to pray toward that end.

“In your heart pray for us to Jesus that he gives us peace and stability,” Alyes said. “For the sake of Jesus, even if we don’t have a building, we will keep praying.”

Kirkuk is located 250 kilometers (155 miles) north of Baghdad and has about 10,000 Christians.