

Iraq's 'Christian Capital' Wiped out as Thousands Flee Radical Islamists

Islamic State militants (also known as ISIS) have taken the Christian town of Qaraqosh, as well as many of the surrounding towns and villages on the Nineveh plain. Tens of thousands more Iraqis, including Christians and other religious minorities, have fled their homes over the past 48 hours and are seeking refuge in the surrounding mountains or toward the Kurdish areas of Erbil and Duhok.

International Christian Concern (ICC) is extremely troubled about the situation that Iraq's Christian communities are facing.

"In the past 24 hours, as many as 2,000 families have arrived in Erbil," a Christian leader from Erbil told ICC Thursday evening. "There are 700 or 800 families who couldn't find anywhere to sleep and are on the streets now," he said.

At midnight, a column of ISIS (short for Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) vehicles rolled into the village of Tel Kepe and occupied it, though many of its population had already left, according to the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA). Kurdish Peshmerga forces that had been providing the only substantial military protection for civilians announced that they were withdrawing from the area, as in many places they are heavily outgunned in comparison with the heavy weaponry now being utilized by ISIS.

Estimates of those who abandoned their homes ahead of the ISIS advance have ranged as high as 200,000 across the Nineveh plains. The evacuation of Qaraqosh began at 2:30 a.m. when the Kurdish forces announced that they were withdrawing. Bells began to toll in the churches of Qaraqosh, warning the

residents to take flight. According to AINA, in addition to Qaraqosh, at least eight Christian villages and towns are now emptied, as well as seven Yazidi villages and 15 Shabak villages.

Multiple sources report the situation is now extremely desperate and one of life and death for hundreds of thousands of people. Even for those who manage to flee to safety in the hills, the dangers of thirst and exposure to harsh conditions already have claimed nearly 100 lives of the Yazidi religious minority stranded in the hills; UNICEF confirmed that nearly 50 of those were children.

The United States began airdrops of food and water to these communities and to those stranded in the mountains on Thursday, and it is considering military engagement as well, U.S. officials reported. Even those who have made it to the cities have found limited support as basic resources are in short supply.

"We need our protection and rights to be put on the table," Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II, supreme head of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church, told ICC earlier this week. "The destruction of these Christian communities is a loss not just for Christians but for all in the region."

Urgent calls have come from religious and political leaders across the region to provide immediate assistance of both humanitarian aid and the support necessary to protect these communities from slaughter. Rep. Frank Wolf (R-Va.), along with other members of Congress, has pointedly called on the administration to take action.

"You will come to sincerely regret your failure to take action to stop the genocide in Iraq. Your conscience will haunt you long after you leave office. Mr. President, say something; do something," Wolf wrote in a letter to President Obama on Thursday, the day the humanitarian airlift began.

Todd Daniels, ICC regional manager for the Middle East, says, "The realities on the ground are heartbreaking, as hundreds of thousands of lives stand to be lost at the hands of religious extremists. The violence being perpetrated against the religious minorities of Iraq is nothing short of genocide.

"It is imperative that the United States and the international community take urgent action to protect these communities and to provide the assistance necessary to sustain the presence of Christians in the Middle East," he added.