

Kidnapped Bishop Urges Christians to Stay in Syria

The nephew of bishop Yohanna Ibrahim, one of the two archbishops kidnapped in Syria on Monday, said he hopes Syrian Christians will not use the incident as an incentive to flee the country.

Jamil Diarbakerli, who represents the Assyrian Democratic Organisation (which petitions for the rights of the Assyrian minority) said bishop Ibrahim, head of the Syriac Orthodox Church in Aleppo, was kidnapped on Monday, alongside his counterpart from the Greek Orthodox Church, bishop Boulos Yaziji, after travelling to the Turkish border in an attempt to secure the release of two priests kidnapped in February—Michel Kayyal (Armenian Catholic) and Maher Mahfous (Greek Orthodox).

The driver of the vehicle, Fathallah Kaboud, was later killed, although Diarbakerli said he learned from ecclesiastical sources in Syria that the shooting took place in another part of the city after Kaboud had driven to inform the bishop's office of the kidnapping.

Kaboud had been the personal chauffeur of bishop Ibrahim for a number of years. He leaves behind a wife and two children.

A fourth passenger escaped, but his identity remains unknown.

Reports on Tuesday claimed the bishops had been released, but these were later refuted by church officials.

This latest kidnapping comes a week after bishop Ibrahim told the BBC that there has been no targeting of Christians in Syria during the rebel uprising. Yet on April 17, Greek Melkite Catholic Patriarch Gregory III Laham told the press that more than 1,000 Syrian Christians have been killed and 20

churches destroyed.

The bishop's nephew acknowledged that "there are parts of Syria where there is persecution of Christians," however he said he believes his uncle's desire is for Syrian Christians to remain in the country, wherever possible.

"Things can change dramatically after the kidnapping of two important Christian leaders, but even though there is a war in Aleppo, the two bishops stayed and want their people to do the same—not to leave the country, not to empty Syria of Christians," he said.

Darbakerli said the latest kidnapping has increased tensions between Muslims and Christians in Syria, but said he is hopeful a resolution will dissolve tensions.

"I don't want the perpetrators to win by using the archbishop as a weapon for religious and sectarian violence," he said. "I hope that all of Syria will cooperate to immediately find and release the bishops, because these kind of acts shall not serve any part of the conflict."