

Murderous Kidnappers Allegedly Pressured Christian Victim's Employer

A pastor in Kirkuk, Iraq, told Compass that sources close to a Christian reportedly kidnapped, tortured and murdered by al-Qaida over the weekend said the kidnappers had pressured his employer to fire him because he was a Christian.

The body of Chaldean Christian Ashur Issa Yaqub was found on May 16 with marks of severe torture and mutilation. He had worked as a construction worker from the northeastern city of Kirkuk, and al-Qaida members demanded \$100,000 for his release, according to Agence France-Presse.

"It seems that the contractor that Ashur was working for was told he had to fire Ashur because he was Christian, but he refused," said the pastor, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "Because the contractor was rich and they couldn't do anything to him, they kidnapped Ashur, and unfortunately they killed him."

When a police patrol found his body on May 16, his head was nearly severed off, according to the Agence France-Presse.

The 29-year-old Yaqub, whose surname is also spelled Jacob, is survived by his wife and three children.

Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Kirkuk Louis Sako told Compass by phone from Rome that he was shocked to get the news of Yaqub's death. While noting that the murder was unusually brutal, the archbishop said it was probably the work of criminal opportunists trying to make money, and that Yaqub was not necessarily targeted as a Christian.

"It was horrible," Sako said. "When I heard it, I was ripped.

He was kidnapped for money. That happens, but kidnappers don't usually torture and kill this way. This wasn't human; this is like they were beasts. They killed him immediately to scare the people of Kirkuk and send the message that if they are kidnapped they have to pay."

Yaqub's body bore marks of dog bites and torture; his legs and arms were tied together and his clothes were covered in blood, according to the Agence France-Presse. His eyes were gouged out, his ears were cut off and his face was skinned, according to the Assyrian International News Agency.

"This was exceptional, but there are other cases where they killed them or left them half dead, like Sameer the doctor," Sako said, referring to the case of a Christian, 55-year-old Sameer Gorgees Youssif, who was kidnapped and released in 2009. "They paid, but they had tortured and hit him."

In Kirkuk another Christian, Iyad Daoud, was kidnapped on Feb. 14 but was freed after ransom was paid for him, according to Iraqi online publication Assafir Press.

Noting that Christians are not the only victims of kidnapping, Sako said Muslims and other nationals living in Kirkuk have been abducted. Although he said he didn't believe the attack targeted Yaqub because he was a Christian, he said Christians were very shaken by the attack, and he feared that many would leave the city as a result.

"I don't think this was against Christians," said Sako. "This one was very poor. We can't imagine; this was someone with three kids, a wife, and poor, really poor. They killed him for nothing; they have no sense of humanity and religion."

Over the last few years, Christian and Muslim leaders in Kirkuk have joined forces to condemn the violent acts of insurgents against their communities through joint statements, among other efforts to promote peace and conviviality. Things "were calm" in the last year, according to Sako, making this

brutal attack perplexing.

"After this, everyone, not just Christians, was shocked," he said. "In Kirkuk, very few Christian families had left the city, but this is shocking. I think that after this they will evacuate, because this is very serious. What is this? Torturing and killing someone; there are no words to explain this."

General Secretary of the Chaldo-Assyrian Student and Youth Union Kaldo Oghanna described the mood among the Christian community in Iraq as miserable. He said by phone that he was at a loss for words to describe what had happened.

Oghanna said he thought only al-Qaida could be capable of such an act.

"It's a very bad situation, and everyone, the youth, they are feeling hopeless," he said. "This kind of attack is – beastly."

He said that the murder of Yaqub took away the glimmer of hope that Iraq's youth had for the future and further eroded their faith in the government.

"We describe this brutal murder of Ashur as a heinous act – a heinous crime against religion, the nation and humanity," Oghanna said. "Today we can't trust our governments on the issue of establishing security."

Oghanna said that he is planning a conference to examine the challenges that youth face in Iraq and the causes and consequences of their migration from the country.

"Today the situation in Iraq is complex," said Oghanna. "Up to now the subject of the government's performance has not been decided. There are the demands of citizens, and terrorist operations of al Qaeda. We fear that the coming days will be hard for us as Christians."

Christians in Iraq asked for prayer that extremist thinking and acts be eliminated in Iraq, he said.