

Muslims Attack Christian Shops in Northern Iraq

Attacks against Christian Assyrian businesses in northern Iraq over the weekend, which local sources said were organized by a pro-Islamic political party, marked the first such destruction of Christian establishments in the Kurdish region.

The rampage threatens the frail security of Iraq's dwindling Christian population, sources said.

After mullah Mala Ismail Osman Sindi's sermon claiming there was moral corruption in massage parlors in the northern town of Zakho on Friday, a group of young men attacked and burned shops in the town, most of them Christian-owned. The businesses included liquor stores, hotels, a beauty salon and a massage parlor, according to Ankawa News.

"The interesting thing with this incident is the place where it happened," Archdeacon Emanuel Youkhana of the Assyrian Church of the East said. "KRG [the Kurdish Regional Government] is, for the most part, safe and secure, and all inhabitants enjoy prosperity and security, until now at least. The future is, by all means, bleak for the Christians and other minorities living there."

Some of the assailants waved banners stating, "There Is No God but Allah," according to Ankawa News. Sources said local authorities were slow in responding, resulting in heavy financial losses.

Thousands of Christians had fled to the Kurdish region since the military intervention in Iraq in 2003.

Mullah Sindi denied accusations that he provoked the violence against northern Iraq's Christian community, according to Ankawa News. After Sindi's sermon, a man reportedly stood up

in the mosque and said that since there were un-Islamic massage parlors in Zakho, Muslims should go destroy them. The mob started with the town's only massage parlor and continued to stores selling liquor and three hotels, where they lit fires, according to Ankawa News.

Later on Friday, the mob tried to attack the Christian quarters of Zakho, but authorities stopped them.

Violence also erupted on Saturday morning (Dec. 3) on the outskirts of Dohuk in two Christian neighborhoods, where groups attacked liquor stores and burned a Christian cultural club. Yesterday (Dec. 5) small pockets of violence against Christian communities were quickly extinguished near the Kurdish capital, Erbil, and in the center of Sulaymaniyah, 200 kilometers (124 miles) south.

In Zakho, near the border with Turkey, owners of liquor shops and other establishments whose shops were burned and vandalized found leaflets on the walls of their destroyed shops Monday threatening to kill them if they reopened, according to Ankawa News. Some of the shop owners were Yezidis, a local religious sect.

The attacks were reportedly organized by the Kurdistan Islamic Union party, which is inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, one of the region's oldest Islamist parties and founded in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood strives to influence governments in the region toward more Islamic values.

In retaliation for the Zakho attacks, members of the Kurdish ruling party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), on Friday evening burned an Islamic Union office in Zakho. Over the weekend, KDP members ransacked and destroyed 10 Islamic Union offices in Dohuk province. The KDP claimed the Islamic Union planned the weekend attacks, and the Islamic Union blamed the KDP for storming their offices in retaliation, according to Ankawa News.

The unrest in the KRG in the last few days is a reflection of the unrest in the region, and as commonly happens, Christians were caught in the middle as innocent victims, Christian sources told Compass.

"I think these attacks were organized," Chaldean Archbishop of Kirkuk Louis Sako said. "They might be connected not only to domestic issues, but also to events outside the country. Unfortunately, it's always the Christians who pay the price."

The motives of the mobs in Zakho were not purely religious, according to General Secretary of the Chaldo-Assyrian Student and Youth Union Kaldo Oghanna. Some of the young men may have attacked the mostly Christian establishments out of religious motives, but Oghanna said many of them joined the attacks only out of frustration toward the government. Others probably joined for personal benefit, as some members of the mob stole money and even liquor from the shops they destroyed, he said.

Most importantly, however, the attacks reflect the attitude of intolerance and discrimination that threaten the stability, safety and democratic process of the Kurdish region, Oghanna said.

"This attack is not a normal attack," Oghanna said. "It threatened our businesses, and it is threatening the situation in Kurdistan. They attacked the democracy of the Kurdish region, its safety and security. Of course, we think there are international and domestic influences that made this situation escalate, but we also think this is in the mentality of those people: that they do not tolerate those who are different. This is our real struggle here."

The greatest challenge of Iraq's Christian Assyrian community since 2003 has been its dwindling population. The waves of the Iraqi Christian exodus have usually come after violent attacks on their communities. Archbishop Sako said he fears this attack may inspire more to leave.

“Now, maybe, because Christians are shocked and afraid, they will start to emigrate, and this is a bigger challenge,” he said. “We are encouraging them to stay.”