

Ongoing Violence Causes Christians to Flee Iraq

While the world's attention has shifted to such countries as Syria, Egypt, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the mass movement of Christians in Iraq continues unabated. Many of them are on the move because they are the targets of ongoing violence.

Hundreds of thousands of Christians have left their cities to find residence elsewhere, both within or outside of Iraq.

Bassam Isho is called a martyr in Mosul. Killed by unknown gunmen on Oct. 1, Bassam 30, was the latest in a series of murdered Iraqi Christians. Gunmen entered the restaurant where Bassam worked and opened fire, killing him instantly.

In Kirkuk two more Christians were killed in the same week. The Christian community views the attacks as violence targeting them.

AsiaNews quotes one anonymous Christian as saying: "The attacks on Christians continue and the world remains totally silent. It's as if we've been swallowed up by the night."

Before the Gulf War in 1991, then number of Christians was estimated at about 1 million. That number fell to an estimated 850,000 in 2003 at the start of the invasion that ended the Saddam Hussein regime.

Since then the numbers have plummeted. At the beginning of the summer Open Doors estimated the number of Christians remaining in Iraq at 345,000. However, the number decreases every month. "It is an estimation; some even think there are less Christians left in the country than that," an Open Doors worker says.

Dr. Carl Moeller, Open Doors USA President/CEO, labels the

attacks against Christians in Iraq as “religicide.” He says, “Christians in cities like Baghdad and Mosul are gripped by terrorism. They are fleeing in droves. Their families are threatened. Extremists want to eliminate Christians from Iraq.”

The attacks continue to be a reason for Christians to leave the dangerous south and center of the country and attempt to build new lives in the far north. But today not only are Christians fleeing from the far southern cities of Baghdad and Basra, they also are moving from the northern cities of Kirkuk and Mosul that not long ago had large Christian communities.

The Iraqis who leave their cities often flee to the relatively secure and most northern Kurdish part of Iraq. That’s why a vast majority of Iraqi Christians now live in this part of the country. Many of them are now Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Open Doors estimates the numbers to be at least 186,000.

Archbishop Bashar Warda recently stated in an interview with the Scottish Catholic Observer that the number of Christians in Ankawa, a suburb of the Kurdish capital, Erbil, grew from 8,500 in the mid-1990s to more than 25,500 in 2011. The Archbishop said 1,500 have arrived in the last 12 months.

But Christians face major problems in the Kurdish region.

“The Christians there struggle with the effects of displacement: loss of income and high unemployment, difficulty finding adequate housing, schooling for children and medical care,” says an Open Doors worker who is a specialist on Iraq. “Because many of the Iraqi Christians that have fled Mosul or Baghdad speak Arabic, they often have no access to a Christian community that speaks their language as in the north traditional Chaldean or Assyrian languages are spoken.”

Problems such as these are why some Christians who relocate in the Kurdish section want to leave Iraq and seek a better

future abroad.

Open Doors is involved in training Iraqi church leaders in the Word and delivering Bibles and Christian literature to the Christians in the country as well as facilitating translation of the Bible into Kurdish dialects.

Additionally, supporting Christian refugees with loans and grants to start small businesses has proven to be an effective tool to encourage them to stay in their country. Open Doors is also helping refugees with vocational training. The children of the IDPs are being supported through trauma counseling.