

Attacks against Christians in Iraq ongoing

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Islamist extremists want Iraq to be a "Muslim only" country. As a result, Christians in Iraq remain continuous targets of violent attacks.

Each month Open Doors field workers receive sad phone calls and emails of Christian acquaintances who report attacks against the Christians near them. While most of them are part of the general violence, such as bomb attacks and mortar fire which intensified during provincial elections last Saturday, a part of the violence can be labelled as specifically targeted against Christians.

"If these attacks take place in a Christian neighbourhood or a Christian village, you can assume they are targeted, especially against the Christian population of the neighbourhoods and villages," said an Open Doors field worker.

"Since the fall of Saddam Hussein 10 years ago, an estimated 1,000 Christians have been killed, a relatively high number compared with percentages killed from other groups in Iraqi society."

A Christian in Mosul was the target of two attacks in one week last March. After the first bomb exploded in his house on a Wednesday, a second one was thrown over his fence on Sunday. The Christian saw two young men running away. The second bomb, wrapped in a black bag and a women's t-shirt, was deactivated by a military engineering team.

In early April, Adbuljabar Khidher Toza, another Christian from Mosul, wasn't so fortunate. Armed men shot him to death in front of his house.

All these targeted attacks serve only one purpose, shares the field worker:

"We received documents and threats stating that the aim of the Islamist Insurgents is to make Iraq a 'Muslim only' country; they want the Christians out."

Louis Raphael Sako, the newly-elected Chaldean Catholic patriarch of Iraq and Syria, says he is afraid of what Islamist rule would mean for Christians.

"People are afraid of a kind of Islamic state as it was in the seventh century where Christians would be considered second-class citizens," he said.

According to Open Doors' 2013 World Watch List materials, there are only an estimated 330,000 to 350,000 Christians left in Iraq. There were more than 1.2 million Christians in the early 1990s. Many of the believers have fled to Jordan and Lebanon or to the northern Kurdish region of Iraq. Iraq is ranked No 4 on the list of the worst persecutors around the globe.

Sako urges Christians to stay: "We must stay. This is our history. This is our cultural heritage. When we leave, everything will leave with us."

Jerry Dykstra, a spokesman for Open Doors USA, adds that "since the start of war in Iraq 10 years ago, the situation for Christians has deteriorated each year".

"Christians have faced church attacks, kidnappings, threats and death for their faith," he said.

"They have no faith in the government providing security for them. Please keep Iraqi Christians in your prayers. Many feel they are alone and forgotten."

The Open Doors ministry in Iraq includes trauma counselling, biblical training for church leaders and Muslim Background Believers, distribution of Bibles and Christian literature, community development projects and working with Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) in Kurdistan.