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Violence in Iraq targets Shiite pilgrims and Christian stores

Asia News (06.12.2011) / HRWF (07.12.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Death toll of three separate attacks in Baghdad and Hilla, against the Shia community that celebrates the festival of Ashura, rises to 30. Several women and children among the dead. Even attacks on Christian activities in the north. Threatening letters to Baghdad businesses. AsiaNews sources: campaign targeting anything that goes "against Shariah."

Baghdad (AsiaNews) - 30 died in a series of attacks that took place yesterday in central Iraq. The bloodiest attack took place in al-Nil, north of the city of Hilla where a car bomb exploded while a procession was passing, killing 16 people including women and children. Further south, a double attack in two different areas of the capital Baghdad killed at least 11 people, but the toll could worsen. The violence against the Iraqi Shia community in the holy month of Muharram-ul-Haram, which culminates on the feast day of Ashura - the "mourning" of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn in the 7th century - follow on a few days from attacks on Christian shops and activities of in the north (see AsiaNews 03/12/2011 [Zakho, Iraqi Islamic extremists attack Christian-owned shops and properties](#)), confirms the climate of insecurity and tension that reigns in the country.

For years in Iraq, during the festival of Ashura there has been a peak in sectarian violence between majority Shi'ite and minority Sunni Muslims, in power at the time of the dictator Saddam Hussein. The tension has been exacerbated with the U.S. invasion in 2003 and the subsequent fall of the regime. For the past two years security has been entrusted only to Iraqi forces, in anticipation of the full withdrawal of U.S. troops from the country (about 10 thousand men, which will start later this year). Eyewitnesses report that the attack in Hilla hit those who were at the end of the procession: "This was a terrible explosion - refers to a man - you could hear the screams of women, and I saw the bodies of women and children on the ground. "

On December 2, however, Islamic extremists targeted Christian shops and activities in the Kurdistan region of Iraq: in Zakho, 470 miles from Baghdad, near the border with Turkey, a fundamentalist group incited by the local imam's sermon devastated dozens of liquor stores, a hotel and massage centres, injuring at least 30 people. The attacks have continued even in the following days in Dohok, where three shops and a community centre belonging to Chaldean Christians were burnt.

Christian sources for AsiaNews, anonymous for security reasons, add that "in Baghdad liquor stores are subject to threats", the managers have received threatening letters,

which state that the exercise "will be blown up." The attacks are the result of a "campaign" that targets "all that is contrary to Shariah," promoted by Islamists who want to radicalize the country. Unfortunately, the source adds, there is no "moderate movement" capable of containing the fundamentalist drift. "The attacks against Christians in the north - warns the Christian personality - are well prepared and have a purpose: to warn the Kurds against supporting the Syrian resistance." Once again, the Christian community, is an "easy target", a victim of those with higher interest in the "game for the conquest of power." (DS)

Islamic rioters attack Christian shops in northern Iraq

First widespread violence against Christians in once-safe Kurdish region

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct News (06.12.2011) / HRWF (07.12.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - 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 (Dec. 2), 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 U.S.-led 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 yesterday (Dec. 5) threatening to kill them if they re-opened, 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 (Dec. 2) 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."

The double lives of Iraq's Christian children

Converts from Islam find persecution is tolerable until it affects their little ones

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct News (11.10.2011) / HRWF (13.10.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Little Nuria and her sisters love singing songs about Jesus. But when people Nuria doesn't know ask her if she's a Christian, she doesn't know what to answer; instead, she looks questioningly at her mother or father.

She is 6 years old and goes to a Christian school in Kirkuk, Iraq. When her aunts and uncles visit, her mother purges the house of anything that points to their Christian faith: the cross on the wall, the Bible, her Christian storybooks. Nuria knows her relatives are Muslims, but sometimes she forgets and she or one of her sisters starts to hum a Christian tune.

The relatives don't like this and tell the parents to teach them Muslim songs.

"When our relatives come from Baghdad, we need to move everything that is Christian," Nuria's mother said. "In short, we are living two lives. It is very hard on children. We are adults, and it is hard for us to live double lives, but for children it is worse. Even their personality will be affected."

Nuria and her family, whose names must be withheld for their safety, are Iraqi Arabs who converted from Islam to Christianity. Whereas Assyrian Iraqis are accepted as Christians by ethnic identity, Iraqi Muslims believe Arabs have no business becoming Christians; it is not possible, according to society and the constitution.

Nuria's parents, like many converts in Iraq, struggle to raise their children as Christians in a society that will only accept them as Muslims. If the children say they believe in Jesus, they face beatings and scorn from their teachers. Because their identification cards say they are Muslims, they cannot enroll in Christian schools, and they must take Islamic religion classes. Likewise, because of their identity cards they later would only be able to marry another Muslim under Islamic rites.

In an Iraq torn by national and religious divides, there is no safe haven for Nuria's family or other Arab families who convert from Islam. Generally big cities are good places for Christians like them to hide, away from extended families who would detect strange behavior like visits to church on Sundays. Even then, however, Muslim neighbors or employers who discover they are converts can make their lives unbearable.

Nuria's parents became Christians seven years ago. Life was easier for her parents before she and her sisters went to school. Her dad, a carpenter, used to speak openly about his faith. These days he is not so brave; he has had to change jobs one too many times because his employers discovered his faith.

"The first years of my faith, I brought so many people to church, because I was motivated, so excited," he said. "Now I don't encourage anyone to be a Christian, because in my experience it is very hard."

These days his landlord, in a mixed Kirkuk neighborhood where mostly Kurds and Assyrians live, has also figured out he is a Christian. The Muslim landlord is offering him either a rent raise or eviction; there's also the option of "going into business" with the landlord by sharing his carpentry work profits with him. Such extortion is all too common.

This is the fifth house they have lived in since 2003, when the family came to faith.

Complications

Matters for converts get more complicated when children enter in. Nuria's parents want to freely train her and her siblings in the ways of Christianity, but the Iraqi constitution makes it practically impossible for them to make any peace with their new identities.

Nuria's older sister just finished elementary school at an institution for Assyrian (Christian) children in Kirkuk. But before the new school year began, the principal of the school called in her parents to tell them he could not take responsibility for their daughter being able to finish the school year.

He had to report the names and identifications of the school's students to the ministry of education, he explained, and if authorities saw he had a "Muslim" student in attendance, he could face criminal charges. Fortunately for the family, her "Muslim" ID went unnoticed.

The family, however, withdrew her from the Christian school to register her in a private school with a state-approved curriculum that includes religion classes on Islam so she can finish her schooling.

"My children are suffering," Nuria's father said. "We are moving from neighborhood to neighborhood, but my children are suffering from this. I will put my two daughters in private school. The church will pay for one, and I will pay for the other."

Nuria's father said that the next step for the family is to look for a new house, but he knows that this won't solve the problem of his children's identity, nor the conflict he feels with his chosen faith.

"Some people tell me it's my fault we have troubles because I tell people I am a Christian," he said. "I am so confused. Even some Christians tell me it's my problem. I am reading the Bible, and it says that whoever denies God in public, God will also deny him, so what can I do?"

Just 87 kilometers (54 miles) north lies the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which is administrated by the Kurdistan Regional Government. Checkpoints and patrols along the road ensure the relative peace the Kurdish region has seen in the last eight years. They also ensure that Arabs cannot enter the north. Nuria's family was held at Erbil's checkpoint for two hours on their way to meet Compass, while Assyrians with crosses dangling over their dashboards were cleared for entrance into Erbil in just minutes.

Kirkuk, where Nuria's family lives, is one of Iraq's most ethnically diverse cities, a reflection of Iraq's larger ethnic, political and religious fragmentation. Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen, along with a shrinking Assyrian Christian community, populate oil-rich Kirkuk. The disputed city has seen much violence as political opportunists try to tip the scales of power. Bomb blasts, killings and kidnappings are common fare here.

On the city's outskirts on the road to Baghdad, authorities on Oct. 1 found the body of a Christian, Hanna Polos Emmanuel, 60, according to Asia News. No one knows why he was killed. On Sept. 21, unidentified gunmen kidnapped three Assyrian Christians and one Turkmen Iraqi on a hunting trip south of Kirkuk, according to Alsumaria TV. They were released after their families paid ransom.

In the previous two months, the Protestant church Nuria's family attends has seen two attempted bombings. There have been at least three bombings against other churches in the city since the beginning of August.

What first attracted Nuria's parents to Christianity was the freedom it offered. But as Arabs in Kirkuk, the family feels trapped.

"In the beginning we didn't think about these problems, because we didn't have the problem with schools," Nuria's father said. "But now I feel more depressed. Our responsibility is more pressure and work."

His wife explained that as Arab converts to Christianity, moving to Baghdad where their family lives is not an option, but neither is moving to the Kurdish part of Iraq. Though Christians there enjoy some freedoms, as Arabs they will always be looked at with suspicion. As a result, it would be difficult to find employment.

"Even if it seems easier to run from this situation, we cannot," she said. "It is easier to leave Kirkuk, but we cannot."

Fight for a Better Future

A Kurdish convert to Christianity, Majeed Muhammed, is fighting for his children's right to not have "Muslim" written on their IDs. He lives in the Kurdish Region's capital, Erbil, just over an hour's drive north of Kirkuk.

In Iraq, children automatically take the religion of their father. For the last five years, Muhammed has been fighting for his eldest to have the right to choose his own religion. Next year the boy is due to begin first grade with identification card in hand, but he has none. Majeed never recorded his sons' births in the municipality because he didn't want them to grow up with "Muslim" stamped on their identification cards.

"My son, he has a right – not only to study, but a civil and personal right, [yet] he can't even have a passport," Muhammed said. "If I wanted or needed to travel with my family, I cannot take them."

Muhammed has also tried to change the religious designation on his own ID card – he is the only Christian convert in Iraq who has tried to do so. Every lawyer he has asked to take on his case has flatly refused to represent him. In 2008, with the legal counsel of a friend, Muhammed went to an Erbil personal cases court to submit his petition, typing his request that his identification state "Christian."

"As declared clearly, I am requesting to change the column of religion from Muslim to Christian on my identification card by virtue of the mentioned articles declared in Iraq's Federal Constitution, which is confirmed as the highest law," Muhammed wrote in his statement.

Iraq's Federal Constitution says each individual has freedom of thought, conscience and belief, but there is no article on changing one's religion. This makes it legally impossible to apply freedom of belief in the cases of converts, said a Christian Iraqi lawyer on the condition of anonymity.

The judge refused to accept or deny Muhammed's request, telling him that the case was "impossible" and could not be tried in Iraqi courts.

This is the last year Muhammed has to advocate not only for his sons but for all Kurdish Iraqis who have converted from Islam to Christianity. The senior pastor of the Kurdzman Church of the Kurdish region, Muhammed said there are up to 2,000 Kurdish converts to Christianity, but only 200 of them would be brave enough to sign a petition for their IDs to state "Christian."

This year he plans to tell as many people as he can about the struggle of Kurdish Christian converts.

"I'm living in Iraq, I'm living in Kurdistan, so I should have the rights of any citizen in Kurdistan just like they do," Muhammed said. "I didn't ask the government to treat me the way European citizens are treating their citizens. What is possible? What is reasonable?"

Kurdish Christians are asking for only basic religious freedom, he said.

"The government said, 'We will not support you financially,' and we said, 'OK, no problem.' They said, 'Don't evangelize in the street publicly;' we said, 'OK, we won't do that. But you should give us another chance. We want to register [as Christians].'"

Muhammed's 6-year-old son, Jeener, is attending a private Christian kindergarten this year, and last year he asked his father if he could send him to one of the government schools; Muhammed refused. He told Compass that sometimes when his son hears the mullahs begin the call for prayer with the words, "Allahu Akbar [God is the greatest]," Jeener asks what they are saying.

"I tell him that some people are talking about God," Muhammed said. "He says: 'Why are they not coming to our church?' [I say], 'Because they don't believe in Jesus.' He says: 'I hate them.' I say, 'No, don't hate them.'"

When his son asks why he can't go to their school, he replies, "Because they are talking about 'Allahu Akbar,'" Muhammed said. "He says, 'OK, I will not go there.'"

Next year Muhammed needs to send his son to first grade, and he said that if he doesn't issue an ID for him by then he could face criminal charges, and the possibility of a prison sentence and fine, for not registering his son with authorities.

It is impossible for him to explain to his son the efforts he is making for him, he said, and even more unlikely that he will succeed in them.

Children with No Friends

Surush Bidookh has been beaten and insulted for his Christian faith, yet he is only 9 years old. His family fled to Iraq from Iran for political reasons before he was born. They came to Christianity in Iraq.

Surush's parents, seeing what their children have to bear for their choice, are weary and wonder if their children's lives would be easier in a Western country where so many Christian converts have already fled.

His father, Siyamand Bidookh, has a story similar to that of other converts to Christianity: the persecution was tolerable until it started to affect his children. Bidookh, a pastor among the Iranian community in Erbil where he is known as Pastor Said, and his wife have received numerous death threats in Iraq for being converts to Christianity.

Their IDs state they are "Muslim," and so do their children's. Authorities and neighbors assume they are Muslim because they come from an Islamic country and are infuriated when they hear that these foreigners have turned their backs on the national religion of Iran.

When Surush started first grade in Erbil, a teacher beat him in front of the class and told him he was a "kafir" (infidel) like his father. Bidookh spoke to the principal, who let the

boy stay out of religion classes. This year, before Surush was to start third grade, however, the new principal of the school called Bidookh and his son to his office and told them that if Surush did not pass the religion exam, he would hold him back a year.

Last year Bidookh's daughter, Sevda, who was in kindergarten, came home from school and asked why her teacher said their family was going to "burn" for being Christians. After this she was too afraid to go to school and stopped attending for the rest of the year.

"When my kids go to school and say hello to the teachers, they don't respond," their mother said. "I say to them, 'What kind of an example are you setting for these kids?'"

The Bidookhs say their children have no friends in the neighborhood. Most play time ends with their children's toys stolen and their children either beaten or scorned. They don't let them play outside anymore.

"How can a 9-year-old not have friends?" Surush's mother said. "What kind of a man will he grow up to be?"

These days they wonder if escaping to a different country is a better solution for their three children.

"I never went to God, and I didn't look for Him," Bidookh said. "He came to me and turned me into a pastor to serve the Iranians here. My life is in His hands. I will go where He sends me."

Insurgent blast ravages church building

Attack on Syriac Orthodox building in Kirkuk is its third in five years

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct News (16.08.2011) / HRWF (22.08.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - An insurgent blast left a church building in Kirkuk, Iraq severely damaged on Monday (Aug. 15) in a second round of attacks against the city's Christian community in two weeks.

The bombing of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Mar Afram was the only attack against Christian targets amid a wave of violence that swept across Iraq yesterday, hitting 17 cities and claiming about 70 lives, according to The Associated Press.

An explosive device next to one of the church's walls exploded at 1:20 a.m. on Monday. Photos showed the bricks of one of the side walls strewn across the church floor and furniture, and one of the metal doors twisted open.

In two other separate attacks on Monday, insurgents placed deadly vehicle bombs in the center of Kirkuk, killing one and injuring four.

No Christians were killed in the attack against the church. Police announced higher protective measures for Kirkuk's churches, according to Alsumaria Iraqi Satellite TV Network.

On Aug. 2, insurgents targeted three churches in the city. Police discovered and disarmed a bomb near a Protestant church building and one by a Syriac Orthodox church. A third bomb exploded in front of the Holy Family Syriac Catholic Church, injuring 13 Muslims who lived nearby.

Abuna Gourgis Alyes, a priest at the Mar Afram church, told Compass that Monday's attack was the third and most devastating one against his church in the last five years. The church building suffered minor damage from bomb blasts in 2006 and 2008.

A Protestant pastor who requested anonymity spoke to Compass by phone as he stood in the rubble of Mar Afram on a visit to the Orthodox priest's church.

"Now I am here and seeing it with my own eyes," the pastor said, overwhelmed at the sight of the blown-out wall and wreckage. "They have to demolish the church and rebuild it."

The pastor's church building was also damaged in the Aug. 2 attack, as security forces tried to neutralize a car bomb parked in front of the church complex.

Alyes said no one was hurt in Monday's attack, but that he did not know how he would continue to perform mass for the church's 90 families. In a matter-of-fact voice, he said the greatest damage to the congregation is the fear that will surely drive more families out of town to the Kurdish part of Iraq or beyond the country's borders. Since January, 10 of Mar Afram's families have fled Kirkuk.

"Many will leave Kirkuk because of this explosion," Alyes said. "Many Christians take this event as an opportunity to make their decision to leave the city. I am sure many will leave after this."

According to Christian support organization Open Doors, there are 300,000 to 350,000 Christians left in Iraq, down from 1.2 million before the 2003 U.S.-led military operation in the country. The U.S. government plans to withdraw its troops from Iraq by the end of 2011.

Kirkuk and its surrounding towns belong to an oil-rich territory claimed by Kurdish and Arab administrations. For years authorities have postponed a referendum to determine which side would have the right to Kirkuk, an ethnically diverse city that includes Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen, including a small minority of Arab Christians.

The conflict over the city has put Christians in the cross-fire of the opposing groups. A young Muslim Iraqi from Kirkuk's Turkmen community told Compass that Monday's unrest and the damage to the church is part of an effort to destabilize the country in an ongoing struggle for power.

"When Christians are targeted, they accuse extremists," said the Iraqi, who identified himself only as Kamal. "I think some people are trying to create unrest and destabilize the situation. We have Turkmen, Arabs, Kurds; there are many politicians who benefit from Kirkuk's instability."

He said Kirkuk is one of the hottest points of tension in the country, with all three groups – Turkmen, Arabs and Kurds – competing for control of the city. Article 140 of the Iraq's constitution states that the city's future will be determined based on a demographic majority of the population in a referendum.

"There are many groups trying to take Kirkuk to their territory," he said. "These attacks are mostly politically [rather] than terrorist motivated, so that Christians can leave the city so that it is left to other groups, who will also be targeted."

Christian journalist Emad Matty said the attacks in Kirkuk are part of a greater, politically motivated tactic to purge Arab-majority cities, including Baghdad and Mosul, of their Christian populations.

Asked how he thought Christians saw the attacks in Kirkuk this month, he said the predominant feeling was fear.

"It's like it was in Baghdad and Mosul: They are afraid and are under attack from unknown gunmen," said Matty, a freelance reporter. "There are political groups, and I don't want to say which ones, but there are groups who are targeting Christians for political reasons."

Alyes, who has lost a relative to the violence, said he would not give up hoping for peace and stability in Iraq nor stop holding mass in the city. He asked Christians around the world to pray toward that end.

"In your heart pray for us to Jesus that he gives us peace and stability," Alyes said. "For the sake of Jesus, even if we don't have a building, we will keep praying."

Kirkuk is located 250 kilometers (155 miles) north of Baghdad and has about 10,000 Christians.

Blast near church in Kirkuk injures 13

Christian leaders say senseless violence designed to confuse, shock

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct News (03.08.2011) / HRWF (17.08.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - A car blast outside a Syrian Catholic church in Kirkuk, Iraq yesterday morning left 13 wounded as police located and disarmed two more car bombs targeting churches in the city, according to area sources.

Online video images of the attack against the Holy Family Church showed one of its walls blasted open and all its surfaces covered with broken glass, rubble and dust from the entrance where the explosion took place to the sanctuary on the far end of the building. The explosion occurred on the second day of the month-long Muslim fasting period of Ramadan.

Nearby houses in one of Kirkuk's oldest quarters, where Muslims and Christians had lived together peacefully, were seriously damaged, and cars on the street were left in twisted piles of metal. Shattered glass wounded 13 residents as they slept, area sources said.

"We are sad because this is nonsense, and people are discouraged," the archbishop of Kirkuk, Monsignor Louis Sako, told Compass. "We try to encourage them and give them hope. We have asked the mayor-governor to help the families that lost their houses and cars before thinking to restore the church."

Today all but one of the wounded residents in the church's neighborhood – an elderly man who was seriously injured – reportedly had been released from the hospital. The Rev. Imad Yalda, the parish priest, was in the church building at the time of the blast and was also slightly wounded.

Though Yalda and the community were sad about yesterday's events, a local pastor who requested anonymity told Compass such attacks have become a normal part of the lives of Christians in Iraq.

"He accepted what happened, but he was very sad for the building of his church," the pastor said. "But this has become ordinary for us, and we expect that any minute something will happen here. When you are living in this situation, you are used to accept what is happening."

No terrorist or extremist group has taken responsibility for yesterday's attack in Kirkuk, and local church leaders said it seems Christians in Iraq are trapped in a senseless game of power and intimidation.

"Sometimes we feel there is some pressure over the Christians all over Iraq to make them leave their cities and go to the northern part of Iraq, to Kurdistan," said the pastor, "but who knows? I can't say those who did this want us to leave our city."

Sako said the perpetrators, whether they are Islamic extremists with anti-Christian motives or terrorists with political motives, are trying to create an atmosphere of confusion by attacking Christians during the Muslim holy month of fasting, Ramadan.

"They are using this to shock people," said Sako. "They are getting the attention of politicians in Kirkuk and in Iraq and saying, 'We are here and powerful, and we can do whatever we want.' It's just confusing – [they want to] say they are here and create a chaotic situation and make a panic among the people."

Car Bombs Defused

Authorities also located two other cars full of explosives in the area. One was parked in front of the church building of Mar Gourgis, of the Assyrian Church of the East. A school is located next to the church building.

Another vehicle packed with explosives was parked in front of a Protestant church in the neighborhood. When the church pastor and others in the neighborhood heard the blast at the Holy Family Church at 5:30 a.m., they came out to see what had happened.

In front of the Protestant church complex they saw a suspicious car filled with containers of gas. Before noon, special forces confirmed the car was full of explosives and disarmed it. In the process there was a small explosion that broke 21 windows of the church complex.

Kirkuk's Christian leaders said they fear more Christians will decide to migrate abroad after this attack. The Protestant church that was targeted yesterday has 70 members, of which nine will be leaving the country in the next two months, according to its leaders. Yet they hope that Christians will remain in Iraq.

"We continue to witness to Jesus Christ and our Christian values; we are not afraid," Sako said.

Kirkuk, 250 kilometers (155 miles) north of Baghdad, is a culturally diverse city with about 10,000 Christians.

There have been at least 45 abductions in Kirkuk since the start of the year, with most victims coming from well-to-do families, Agence-France Presse (AFP) reported last month.

A special report prepared for U.S. Congress last month stated that Iraq's security is declining and is less safe than it was a year ago.

AFP also reported that June was the deadliest month in Iraq so far this year, with 271 people killed in attacks according to a government count.

A Baghdad court found four men guilty of "planning and preparing" an attack on the Syrian Catholic Church of Our Lady of Salvation last October in which 58 people were killed. The judge handed three perpetrators the death sentence and a 20-year jail term to another, according to The Associated Press. The men, whose names authorities did not release, have one month to appeal.

Last year's attack was the deadliest one against the country's Christians since Islamic extremists began targeting them in 2003. On Oct. 31, 2010, during evening mass, al Qaeda suicide bombers stormed the church building and held some 100 worshipers hostage for hours after detonating bombs in the neighborhood and gunning down two area policemen.

The militants sprayed the sanctuary with bullets and ordered a priest to call the Vatican to demand the release of Muslim women whom they claimed were held hostage by the Coptic Church in Egypt. When security forces stormed the building, the assailants started to kill hostages and eventually blew themselves up.

It is estimated that more than 50 percent of Iraq's Christian community has fled the country since 2003. There are nearly 600,000 Christians left in Iraq.

Kidnappers allegedly called murdered Christian's employer

Compass Direct News (18.05.2011) / HRWF (06.06.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - A pastor in Kirkuk, Iraq told Compass that sources close to a Christian reportedly kidnapped, tortured and murdered by al Qaeda 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 Monday (May 16) with marks of severe torture and mutilation. He had worked as a construction worker from the northeastern city of Kirkuk, and al Qaeda members had 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." 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."

Kirkuk: Young Christian abducted, tortured and beheaded

Ashur Yacob Issa, 29, was the father of three children. He was abducted three days ago. Negotiations for his released failed. This morning police found his body, which bore "horrific marks of torture". In voicing his outrage, the archbishop of Kirkuk slammed this "inhuman act," urging everyone to work together to "protect defenceless citizens"

AsiaNews (16.05.2011) / HRWF (30.05.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - An Iraqi Christian man was abducted, tortured and then beheaded. The victim was from Kirkuk, northern Iraq. Police found his body this morning. He had been kidnapped three days ago and the family had received a ransom request. However, negotiations for his release did not work out and so he was brutally murdered. For the archbishop of Kirkuk, his death is an "inhuman act" because it goes "against every human and religious principle". Iraqi Christians have been living in a state of high tension since the killing of Osama Bin Laden, fearing possible revenge by local Muslim extremists.

Ashur Yacob Issa was 29 years old and had three children, a source in Kirkuk told *AsiaNews*. He was abducted three days ago for ransom. His kidnappers wanted US\$ 100,000 to release him. However, negotiations with his family "did not work out", a local Christian said.

The incident came to a terrible end this morning, when police found the young man's body, by the side of a bridge. The body showed "horrific marks of torture", the source said. The head had been cut off and the eyes gauged out of their socket.

The crime sent a shockwave through the city, especially in its Christian community. although the victim was kidnapped in order to get a large sum of money, the death of Osama Bin Laden by the US on 2 May has raised the tension level in the Christian community. Since then in fact, it has been living in fear of possible reprisals by Muslim extremists.

Speaking to *AsiaNews*, Mgr Louis Sako, archbishop of Kirkuk, condemned the murder of the young man, calling it an "inhuman act" that goes against "every human and religious principle".

"No man who believes in God and respects life can commit such acts," the prelate said.

Now Mgr Sako's concern is for the widow and her fatherless children.

However, in a warning to the perpetrators of this act, the archbishop said, "Let them think about those who are left without a father and a husband. Even if human justice is not done, divine justice shall, sooner or later".

Lastly, the archbishop of Kirkuk called on police and security forces officials, both local and national, to undertake joint action "so that all people of good will can work together to protect defenceless citizens." (DS)
