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5 kidnapped Syrian Christians released by Islamists, others still held

Persecuted church (23.10.2014) <http://persecutedchurch.info/2014/10/28/5-kidnapped-syrian-christians-released-by-islamists-others-still-held/> - A church leader and four Christian women who were among around 21 believers kidnapped in north-west Syria earlier this month have been released by Islamist militants.

The four women were freed by Islamists from the al-Qaeda-linked group al-Nusra Front on 8 October after being held for three days. Hanna Jallouf, the captured church leader, was released on the following day.

Conflicting reports have emerged as to whether or not the other kidnapped Christians, who are thought to include children, are still being held.

The freed Christians do not appear to have been harmed. According to a senior church leader from Aleppo, the Islamists "did not ask the women who were released any questions".

Since his release, Hanna Jallouf has been placed under house arrest in the village of Knayeh. Local sources told reporters that the church leader's house arrest was ordered by an Islamic court.

The Christians were captured by the rebels in Knayeh on the night of Sunday 5 October. The village has been held by Islamist militants since 2013, initially by the extremely brutal group known as Islamic State and subsequently by the al-Nusra Front.

Many other Christians in Syria have been kidnapped since the start of the conflict in 2011.

The whereabouts of two Syrian archbishops, Yohanna Ibrahim and Boutros Yazigi, who were kidnapped in April 2013, remains unknown.

The four women abducted along with Father Hanna have been released; no message from the kidnappers

Agenzia Fides (09.10.2014) [http://www.fides.org/en/news/36510-ASIA SYRIA The four women abducted along with Father Hanna have been released no message from the kidnappers#.VDuVf8IcSUK](http://www.fides.org/en/news/36510-ASIA_SYRIA_The_four_women_abducted_along_with_Father_Hanna_have_been_released_no_message_from_the_kidnappers#.VDuVf8IcSUK) Yesterday the 4 women who were part of the group of about twenty hostages kidnapped by an armed gang along with Father Hanna Jallouf, parish priest of the Syrian village of Knayeh, in the night between Sunday 5 and Monday 6 October (see Fides 10/07/2014) were released. This was reported to Fides Agency by Bishop Georges Abou Khazen OFM, Apostolic Vicar of Aleppo for the Catholics of the Latin rite. "The kidnappers - explains Bishop Abou Khazen - did not ask the women who were released any questions". Local sources confirm that the kidnappers were armed. So far, the authors of the kidnapping have not sent any messages to the hostages' relatives and friends. But the high number of abductees suggests that we are not dealing with common criminals. The Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land attributes the seizure to a collective brigade of Jabhat al-Nusra, the jihadist faction that controls the area. The place where the hostages are held is a few kilometers from the village of Knayeh.

Bishop Georges Abou Khazen reports to Fides the expressions of affection that come from all over Syria towards the Catholic community of Knayeh, where also Sister Patrizia Guarino, of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary works. "Sister Patrizia - says Bishop Abou Khazen - is venerated by all. She is the village nurse, and everyone sees her as a spiritual guide, who helps to heal not only diseases, but also the suffering of the soul".

No contact with kidnapped Syrian priest, parishioners

WWM (08.10.2014) - Three days after a Syrian priest and some 20 of his parishioners were abducted from a village in northern Syria, a superior in his Franciscan order has confirmed that still no contact has been made with their jihadi kidnappers.

On Sunday night, Oct. 5, members of the Al-Nusra Front seized Fr. Hanna Jallouf, the parish priest of Qunaya (Knayeh) village, located in Idlib province just eight kilometers from the Turkish border, an area where al-Nusra Front and other rebel groups have been fighting the Syrian army for three years.

Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, speaking from the Franciscan Custody of the Land offices in Jerusalem, confirmed to *World Watch Monitor* that he has received no word whatever on the location or fate of the captured Christians. Those taken hostage reportedly include three women and several young people.

Three Franciscan nuns who run a youth center and dispensary in the village were inside the St. Joseph Convent at the time and escaped capture.

IS militants had taken control of Qunaya village and the surrounding region last year, forcing churches to remove their crosses, banning the ringing of church bells and requiring women to veil their faces. An estimated 700 Catholic families live in the small village and nearby area.

But when the Islamic State militants moved to the east at the end of 2013, Al-Nusra jihadists took over. Reportedly the group, which has seized control of both Christian and Muslim villages in the area, had recently seized Fr. Hanna's passport.

According to Fr. Pierbattista, the Qunaya Christians were being accused falsely of "collaborating" with the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. One source in Aleppo told AFP that the convent had been completely looted, and another report alleged the rebels had taken these church relics and documents to use as "evidence" against the Christians, to try them before a Shariah court. But Fr. Pierbattista could not confirm either of these claims.

A Syrian activist contacted after the kidnapping told AFP that Al-Nusra had been trying to take control of some of the Franciscan properties in Qunaya, which had been resisted by Fr. Hanna last week.

According to AFP's Aleppo source, Al-Nusra rebels were "angry with Father Hanna because he refused to give them some of the olives harvested from trees on the convent's land."

The 62-year-old has lived in Qunaya for the past 12 years, one of 19 Franciscan workers currently serving in the country. A religious order of Catholics who still use the Latin rite, the Franciscans have ministered in Syria for the past eight centuries.

In April, a Dutch Jesuit priest who refused to leave the embattled Syrian city of Homs, Frans van der Lugt, was killed by so-far unidentified assassins in his garden.

Two weeks ago, a defector from IS in Raqqa told the BBC that an Italian Jesuit priest, Father Paolo Dall'Oglio (who went missing in July 2013 after visiting ISIS' headquarters to try to hold talks) is still alive, but apparently a hostage.

Two Bishops from Aleppo, Yohanna Ibrahim and Boulos Yaziji, were kidnapped in April 2013: there has been no word about them for some time.

Jihadists stone Syria woman to death for 'adultery'

AFP (18.08.2014) - Jihadists in the northern Syrian province of Raqqa have accused a woman of adultery and stoned her to death, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Friday.

It was the first "execution" of its kind by the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) group in Syria, which has proclaimed the establishment of an Islamic "caliphate" straddling Syria and Iraq.

"ISIS carried out its first sentence of death by stoning against a woman in Tabaqa, accusing her of adultery," said the Britain-based Observatory, referring to a town in Raqqa province, most of which is under ISIS control.

An activist in the province confirmed the report, and said the stoning took place in a public square in the Tabaqa market area Thursday evening.

"This is the first time that this has happened here," added Abu Ibrahim.

A second activist in Raqa, Hadi Salameh, said the woman was reportedly in her thirties, but that few details were known about her except that she was killed after sentencing by an ISIS religious court.

"The situation is unbearable. Stoning is the worst punishment history has known. A quick death is more merciful," Salameh told AFP via the Internet, using a pseudonym for security reasons.

"The woman's family did not know the sentence was going to be carried out at this time," said Salameh.

He said residents are "terrified" of ISIS, but fear the consequences of reacting to its harsh methods.

ISIS first emerged in the Syrian conflict in late spring last year.

Some Syrian rebels initially welcomed the jihadists, seeing them as potential allies in their war to topple President Bashar Assad's regime.

But the group's systematic abuses and quest for domination swiftly turned the mainstream opposition against it, and rebels have been battling ISIS fighters since January.

ISIS spearheaded a recent offensive in Iraq, capturing large swath of territory and massive amounts of weapons from fleeing Iraqi troops.

ISIS beheads, crucifies in push for Syria's east

Reuters (12.08.2014) - <http://www.rn.org/articles/43142/> - Islamic State has crushed a pocket of resistance to its control in eastern Syria, crucifying two people and executing 23 others in the past five days, a monitoring group said on Monday.

The insurgents, who are also making rapid advances in Iraq, are tightening their grip in Syria, of which they now control roughly a third, mostly rural areas in the north and east.

Fighters from the al-Sheitaat tribe in eastern Deir al-Zor had tried to resist Islamic State's advance this month, according to residents near the area and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitoring organization.

In al-Shaafa, a town on the banks of the Euphrates river, Islamic State beheaded two men from the al-Sheitaat clan on Sunday, the Observatory said, and gave residents a 12-hour deadline on Monday to hand over members of the tribe.

In other parts of Deir al-Zor province, the militants crucified two men for the crime of "dealing with apostates" in the city of Mayadin, and two others were beheaded for blasphemy in the nearby town of al-Bulel, the Observatory said.

Islamic State, which has fought the Syrian army, Kurdish militias and Sunni Muslim tribal forces, has made rapid gains in Syria since it seized northern Iraq's largest city, Mosul, on June 10, and declared an Islamic caliphate.

The Observatory said a further 19 men from the al-Sheitaat tribe were executed on Thursday, 18 shot dead and one beheaded, on the outskirts of Deir al-Zor city. It said the men worked at an oil installation.

"No one will now dare from the other tribes to move against Islamic State after the defeat of the al-Sheitaat," said Ahmad Ziyada al-Qaissi, an Islamic State sympathizer contacted by Skype from Mayadin.

Tribal sources say the conflict between Islamic State and the al-Sheitaat tribe, who number about 70,000, flared after Islamic State took over of two oil fields in July.

One of those, al-Omar, is the biggest oil and gas field in Deir al-Zor and has been a lucrative source of funds for rebel groups.

The head of the al-Sheitaat tribe, Sheikh Rafaa Aakla al-Raju, called in a video message for other tribes to join the fight against Islamic State.

"We appeal to the other tribes to stand by us because it will be their turn next ... If (Islamic State) are done with us the other tribes will targeted after al-Sheitaat. They are the next target," he said in the video, posted on YouTube on Sunday.

Winning respect

A Syrian human rights activist from Deir al-Zor who fled for Turkey last year said rebels opposed to President Bashar al-Assad had retreated to al-Sheitaat tribal areas from which they had been trying to mount resistance to Islamic State.

He said, on condition of anonymity, that the resistance had been crushed in the last few days. "The situation is very bad, but the people can't repel them," he said.

He said that, in tandem with their violent campaign, Islamic State was distributing gas, electricity, fuel and food to garner local support.

"It is a poor area. They are winning support this way. They won a lot of support this way. They are halting theft and punishing thieves. This is also giving them credibility."

Another resident of Deir al-Zor, Abdullah al-Noami, said that four al-Sheitaat towns had fallen.

"These areas have fallen into the hands of Islamic State after the withdrawal of the (al-Sheitaat) fighters. The youths who were found were executed or their heads were cut off on the grounds that they fought against Islamic State," he said.

More than 170,000 people have been killed in Syria's civil war, which pits overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim rebels against Assad, a member of the Shi'ite-derived Alawite minority, backed by Shi'ite militias from Iraq and Lebanon.

The insurgency is split between competing factions, with Islamic State emerging as the most powerful.

In Raqqa, Islamic State's power base in Syria, its hold appears to be growing only firmer even as Syrian government forces intensify air strikes on territory held by the group.

One Syrian living in an area of Islamic State control near Raqqa said the number of its fighters in the streets had grown dramatically in the last few weeks, particularly since it captured the army's 17th Division at the end of July.

The group has levied a tax on non-Muslims, and settled foreign fighters in confiscated homes, said the resident, who asked for anonymity due to security concerns.

But despite that, as in Deir al-Zor, it has won a degree of respect among locals by curbing crime using their version law of and order. For youths without work, salaries offered by Islamic State are one of the few sources of income.

"The (Islamic) State has respect and standing and its voice is heard," said the resident, speaking by Skype.

Syrian Christians Under threat

Al-Ahram (07.08.2014) - <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/6907/19/Syrian-Christians-under-threat.aspx> - The wildfire victories of the Islamic State (IS, formerly the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) in northern Iraq and Syria have left the area's minorities under threat.

Torn between fighting back and leaving for good, Assyrians, Syriacs, Armenians, and Kurds, all inhabitants of the area and part of its rich historic legacy, are weighing their ever-diminishing options.

IS policies, inspired by a fanatical version of Islam, were made clear in its conquest of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city. There, they destroyed Christian and Shiite places of worship and demanded that all non-Muslims pay the jizya, an ancient poll tax, observe a certain dress code, or convert to Islam.

Exile is another option that the IS has offered to the conquered population. Many escaped before the arrival of the hardened followers of the Al-Qaeda affiliate, which recently declared its leader a caliph and demanded that all Muslims obey him.

Last week, IS forces converged on Al-Hasakah in northeastern Syria, a province dominated by Christians, and claimed it would annex it to its expanding territories.

IS leaders said that they plan to "liberate" the provincial capital of Al-Hasakah from the "hands of the infidels," an epithet which it uses indiscriminately in reference to Muslims and non-Muslims who oppose its brutal methods.

The IS has proved itself to be a tough adversary in battle. Its fighters are toughened by years of fighting in both Iraq and Syria, and have a high morale after their recent successes. Armed with superior weaponry stolen from the arms depots of the Iraqi army, IS fighters are now engaged in skirmishes near Al-Hasakah, testing the city's defences before an assault.

Inside the city, the various communities have come together to defend themselves. Reports from the beleaguered city speak of a growing coalition of Kurds, Christian militia, and regime forces - groups that have conflicting agendas but are now united by the threat of a common enemy.

Allowing Al-Hasakah to fall into the hands of IS would be a death sentence for the historic city's cultural diversity and its long legacy of inter-communal co-existence.

Al-Hasakah's inhabitants take pride in the near absence of fanaticism in their community, but to fight back against IS they will need more than pride: they need serious fighting power and superior logistics.

Members of the Syrian opposition claim that the regime is using the IS to restore its own image as a protector of minorities. If the Assad regime has any hope of staying in power, it must convince the minorities that their survival is linked to the survival of the regime.

The tactic may be working. Reports from Al-Hasakah speak of cooperation between the city's inhabitants and the Syrian army.

If the IS manages to take the city, Al-Hasakah inhabitants will have to leave en masse, said Jamil Diarbakerli, an Istanbul-based representative of the Assyrian Democratic Organisation.

"There have been cases of departures of Christians from the city, and these may develop into an exodus because what happened in Mosul planted terror into the hearts of the inhabitants. Should this happen, the region will lose much of its culture and history," he said.

According to Diarbakerli, the international community "bears a humanitarian and legal responsibility towards the nations of the region, especially the Christians" and must not leave them at the mercy of extremist groups. But some inhabitants of Al-Hasakah denied that the population was willing to leave and promised instead to fight for the city.

Sources in Al-Hasakah said that meetings had been held by various groups in the city and steps were being taken to protect it against the IS.

Soliman Yusef, an Al-Hasakah-based researcher, said that the Christians of the city were determined to stay.

"It is true that a few Christian families have left the city, but it is wrong to speak of this as an exodus. Most of those who left came back after the city came under the control of local community groups," Yusef said.

"Kurdish forces are now in control of large areas of Al-Hasakah, and they take their orders from the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union, which is known for its close ties with the regime."

But the future is still uncertain, he admitted.

"An exodus will be expected if the battles move inside the city or if Al-Hasakah were to fall to IS. Should this happen, everyone will leave and not only the Christians," he said.

A French proposal to offer asylum to Syria's beleaguered Christians has caused outrage in the country. Syrian church leaders rejected the French government's offer, saying that it could jeopardise the future of their community.

If France really wants to help, it should use its international influence to demand protection for the Christians in their current home, not encourage their displacement, some said.

Many Syrian Christians, especially Assyrians, left for Europe over the past 20 years. Within the past three years, the pace of emigration has picked up.

The same trend is noticeable in Iraq, where many Iraqi Christians left after seeing their churches bombed and members of their community slain as part of the ongoing carnage that has proved particularly hazardous to minorities.

Many Syrians, Muslims included, are worried about the loss of cultural diversity caused by fanaticism and the persecution of minorities. Some point out that Christians used to make up 15 per cent of the nation. Although statistics are not readily available, the figure today may be as low as five per cent.

In pre-revolutionary Syria, minorities had few complaints. The state guaranteed them the right to worship, and Christians were able to build churches and establish societies.

The state did not grant them special laws on marriage and inheritance, and they are still banned from the presidency, however. But they enjoyed religious freedom and the usual set of citizen rights.

But since the start of the civil war, Syrian Christians, among the worst affected by the violence, have found the temptation to leave hard to resist. With offers of asylum from more than one western nation, many Christians decided that enough was enough.

This is a trend that may alter forever the cultural fabric of Syria, a country that was once considered the birthplace of Christianity.

Conference of European bishops condemns crucifixions in Syria

Says Deaths Contrary to Any Attempt to Pacify Country

Zenit (30.06.2014) / <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/conference-of-european-bishops-condemns-crucifixions-in-syria> - The Presidency of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences has expressed its outrage at the crucifixions of rebel fighters near the Syrian city of Aleppo.

In a statement signed by Cardinals Peter Erdö and Angelo Bagnasco, respectively president and vice president of the CCEE, the bishops said such acts are "against any attempt to pacify the country already battered by years of fratricidal war."

Eight rebel fighters were crucified in Syria by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) because they were considered too moderate, a monitoring group has claimed.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which relies on contacts on the ground in Syria, said the men were crucified on Saturday and that their corpses were still on view. The crucifixions took place in the town square of Deir Hafer in eastern Aleppo and will be left there for three days, it said.

The men were accused of being "Sahwa" fighters, the Observatory said, a term ISIS uses to refer to rival combatants whom it accuses of being controlled by Western powers.

Another man was crucified for perjury in Al Bab, but has survived, according to the SOHR.

Statement of the CCEE

"The Presidency of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE) informed of the crucifixion of people in the center of Deir Hafer (Syria) that preceded the proclamation of the Islamic Caliphate in the Syrian and Iraqi territories under the control of the Isis expresses its strong indignation and condemnation of such acts. These acts that use

religion to justify acts of summary justice are against any attempt to pacify the country already battered by years of fratricidal war."

Cardinal Péter Erdő, Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest, CCEE President

Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, Archbishop of Genoa, vice president of the CCEE

Crucifixion from ancient Rome to modern Syria

By Alison Gee

BBC (08.05.2014) / <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27245852> - Disturbing photographs recently emerged from Syria showing the bodies of two executed men hanging on crosses. Why has a punishment used in ancient Rome now emerged as a feature of Syria's civil war?

The dead men in the photographs are blindfolded - their limp, outstretched arms tied to planks of wood with green string.

A banner wrapped around one of the bloodied corpses reads: "This man fought against Muslims and set off an explosive device here."

The photos show a handful of people, including children, taking a closer look while others go about their normal business in the northern city of Raqqa, unfazed by the bodies suspended a few feet away.

The bodies remained on display in the centre of a roundabout for two days according to the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. A jihadist group, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), is thought to have been responsible.

As with a similar case in Raqqa in March, the men are thought to have been executed first, before being attached to crosses and publicly displayed.

Amnesty International also documented a case of crucifixion in Yemen in 2012, when an Islamist group found a 28-year-old guilty of planting electronic devices in vehicles, enabling US drones to track and kill their occupants. He too was executed first and hung on a cross afterwards.

Sheikh Dr Usama Hasan, Islamic scholar and senior researcher in Islamic Studies at the Quilliam Foundation in London, says this form of punishment arises from a very literal, or fundamentalist, reading of the Koran.

Verse 33 of the fifth book of the Koran says: "Indeed, the penalty for those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger and strive upon earth [to cause] corruption is none but that they be killed or crucified or that their hands and feet be cut off from opposite sides or that they be exiled from the land. That is for them a disgrace in this world; and for them in the Hereafter is a great punishment."

But Hasan says this passage should not be read in isolation. He cites the following verse which reads: "Except for those who return [repenting] before you apprehend them. And know that Allah is Forgiving and Merciful."

Verses of the Koran which sound very harsh are always followed by the option of repentance and a "reminder that God is ultimately forgiving and merciful," he says.

"These groups tend to be very harsh and unmerciful which is why it is our contention that they are extremely un-Islamic and very far from the spirit of Islam."

For Hasan, crucifixion has no place in the modern world. What happened in Raqqa was intended as a warning to anyone questioning the authority of Isis, he suggests.

Although crucifixion is mentioned in the Koran, it plays a bigger role in the Bible. While Islam recognises Jesus as a prophet, it does not believe, as Christianity does, that he was crucified.

Crucifixion had become an established form of execution in the Roman Empire long before Jesus's birth.

"The famous example is Spartacus," says Prof Mary Beard, referring to the Roman slave and gladiator who died in 71BC, after leading a slave revolt.

"When Crassus finishes off the slave rebellion he lines the Appian Way with crucifixions," she says. It's estimated that 6,000 of Spartacus's followers were killed in this way.

Saint Peter is said to have asked to be crucified upside down because he felt he wasn't worthy of dying in the same way as Jesus - he would also have lost consciousness sooner in this position

"In Republican Rome, 1st Century BC Rome, it is a standard and degrading form of punishment," says Beard, a classical historian at Cambridge University.

"If you are a Roman citizen you do not get crucified. St Peter gets crucified in Rome - in the martyrdom of Peter and Paul the difference is that Paul is a Roman citizen and Peter isn't."

It is thought that Paul was beheaded - a quicker and therefore preferable death.

Although there are references to crucifixions hundreds of years before the Romans these may refer to other forms of impalement - cases where offenders were nailed to trees and other frames, where they were left to die.

The Latin word "crux" which is generally translated as "cross" originally had a less specific meaning, referring to any object on which victims were impaled or hanged.

The Roman emperor Constantine, a Christian, banned crucifixion in the 4th Century AD. More than 1,000 years later, however, it resurfaced as a way of killing Christians in Japan.

In 1597, 26 Christians were crucified in Nagasaki and over the following century, hundreds more were executed in the same way.

"The reason they go for crucifixion is that often as well as killing somebody, it's the exposure and the humiliation and also the warning to other people," says Timon Screech, professor of Japanese history at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

"There are descriptions where the executioner leaves them up for a couple of hours, or it might be until dusk, and then kills them with a sword," he says.

The punishment began to be used against non-Christians too. In 1651, about 150 people were crucified after the Keian Disturbance, a failed uprising against the Shogun.

"I suspect that by the end of the 17th Century in Japan, its association with Christianity has been rather forgotten by most people," says Screech.

But the authorities eventually concluded such a public form of execution drew too much attention to serious crimes against the state that it would be better to hush up.

"Punishments go back to secret assassinations in a dark place," says Screech.

There were also cases where Japanese soldiers crucified people in World War Two. The best documented is that of three Australian prisoners of war working on the Thailand-Burma railway, who were sentenced to death for killing cattle. Bound to a tree, only one of them survived - Herbert James "Ringer" Edwards, who became the inspiration for the character Joe Harman in Nevil Shute's novel, *A Town Like Alice*.

Today, a punishment referred to as "crucifixion" can still be imposed by courts in Saudi Arabia.

"Crucifixions take place after the beheading," says Amnesty International, which campaigns against all forms of capital punishment.

"The body, with the separated head sewn back on, is hung from or against a pole in public to act as a deterrent."

The pole is sometimes, but not always, shaped in the form of a cross.

Assyrian leader: Kurds in Syria must accept real power sharing

AINA (15.03.2014) - Ninos Isho, the leader of the Assyrian Democratic Party in Syria, criticized the Kurdish PYD party for trying to impose itself on Assyrians and Arabs in north-east Syria.

"Its not logical to have 30 percent of the population in this area rule over the other 70 percent," he said in a recent interview on Assyria TV, a channel based in Sweden. "Assyrians and Arabs make up the majority in this area and the Kurdish political groups must accept real power-sharing."

Kurdish groups headed by the PKK controlled party known as PYD have declared autonomy in parts of north-east Syria. The move has been touted as an example of real democracy by Kurds and supporters of the Kurds in Syria but the reality on the ground tells another story

"All Assyrian groups and leaders except for the Dawronoye (known in the west as European Syriac Union and in Syria as Syriac Union Party) are against it, as well as all Arab organizations except for a few Arab individuals," said Mr. Isho in the interview.

The bishop of the Syriac Catholic Church and the bishop of the Assyrian Church of the East in Syria have accused the Kurdish groups of trying to Kurdify the area.

Syria: Abducted Maaloula nuns released in prisoner exchange

CSW (10.03.2014) - Thirteen Greek Orthodox nuns and their three helpers, who had been held by Syrian rebel forces since December 2013, have been released in exchange for female prisoners held by the Syrian regime.

Lebanese state media reported that the women had been taken overnight on a nine-hour journey to the town of Judayat Yabus on the Syrian-Lebanon border, where they were released.

Lebanon's security chief, General Abbas Ibrahim, who was responsible for the prisoner exchange, stated that approximately 150 female prisoners were to be released in exchange for the nuns' freedom.

Mother Superior Pelagia Sayyaf, head of Maaloula convent, told a press conference: "God did not leave us. The (Nusra) Front was good to us...but we took off our crosses because we were in the wrong place to wear them." The group of mainly Syrian and Lebanese nuns has been held since December 2013, when forces from Jabat Al-Nusra and other jihadi militias overran the ancient Christian town of Maaloula and abducted the women from the Mar Takla Greek Orthodox Convent. Reports indicate the group was subsequently taken to the town of Yabroud, a rebel stronghold that is currently the target of heavy government bombardment.

Christians have been increasingly targeted by Islamist jihadi groups, including in the Christian city of Sadad last November, where 45 were reported to have been killed. Last month, Christians in the town of al-Raqa were ordered by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) to pay a 'jizya' tax and to conduct religious services behind closed doors, and Christian community leaders were obliged to sign an agreement to this effect. Despite many Islamic scholars and local Muslim residents decrying this tax, it nevertheless has been implemented and published on several extremist websites.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) remains concerned by the disappearance of Archbishop Boulos (Paul) Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church and Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Church, who were abducted by gunmen in April 2013 as they returned from a humanitarian mission near the Syria/Turkey border. Their whereabouts are still unknown.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are delighted to learn of the release of the nuns and their helpers. We are particularly pleased to hear they were released unharmed and were treated well. CSW continues to call for the release and safe return of Archbishops Boulos (Paul) Yazigi and Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim, who remain missing, and we urge the Lebanese and Qatari authorities who facilitated the prisoner exchange to use their good offices to secure their release as well."

Nuns released by Syrians after three-month ordeal

By Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad

The New York Times (09.03.2014) - Syrian insurgents released 13 nuns and three attendants who disappeared three months ago from their monastery in the ancient Christian town of Maaloula, Lebanese and Syrian officials said early Monday, ending a drama in which rebels said they were protecting the women from government shelling and Syrian officials said they were abducted in an act of intimidation against Christians.

The handoff was infused with suspense until the last moment. Officials said Sunday afternoon that the nuns had crossed the mountainous border to Arsal, a pro-rebel town in Lebanon, to be handed off to Lebanese officials and driven to Syria.

But amid reports of last-minute problems, reporters and government supporters waited hours at the border with no sign of the nuns. Finally, early Monday, the Lebanese channel Al Jadeed showed the black-clad nuns at the border, beaming, as one embraced a Lebanese security official and officers carried another.

Mother Pelagia Sayaf, the head of the Mar Taqla monastery in Maaloula, thanked President Bashar al-Assad, saying he had worked with Qatari officials for their release. She said the nuns were "treated very well" by the insurgents and were not prevented from wearing religious symbols. Some had speculated that similar declarations on videos from captivity were forced.

"We weren't harassed at all," she said. "No one forced us to remove our crosses."

The government portrayed the release as a major victory, sending senior figures like the Damascus governor Hafez Makhoulf, a relative of President Assad, to greet the nuns. Their ordeal was a major setback for government opponents trying to persuade fence-sitters not to fear jihadists among the insurgents.

They were released after negotiations that, according to official news media and Syrian insurgents, involved Lebanese and Syrian officials; the intelligence chief of Qatar, a country that has supported the revolt in Syria; and members of the radical Islamist insurgent group the Nusra Front.

An intense battle has raged for weeks in the border area around the Syrian town of Yabroud, where the nuns had been held. The fighting has pitted government forces backed by the Lebanese militia Hezbollah against a mix of local rebels and Nusra fighters, who sometimes cooperate and sometimes clash.

There were conflicting reports about the deal. Two rebel leaders from Yabroud, who identified themselves only as Abu al-Majd and Khaled, said that Qatar had offered to pay \$4 million for the nuns' release, but that Nusra had demanded \$50 million. Abu al-Majd said the insurgents had also demanded the release of more than 100 people detained by the government, including women.

But Syrian state television did not mention any swap or payment. The release came after the Qatari intelligence chief met on Sunday with Lebanese officials. Qatar last year helped win the release of a group of Lebanese Shiites held in northern Syria, whom rebels had accused of being Hezbollah fighters.

A Damascus priest, Makaious Kalloumah, said on Syrian television that the Qataris aimed to "shine their image" after Saudi Arabia and other allies withdrew their ambassadors last week in a dispute over regional politics.

George Haswani, a pro-government businessman from Yabroud, told Al Jadeed that the nuns had stayed in his villa there, confirming earlier rebel claims that they were kept safely in the home of a local Christian.

President Assad personally checked frequently on the nuns' health, said Mr. Haswani, whose mediation, rebels say, helped keep Yabroud relatively untouched by fighting until recently. Yabroud has essentially governed itself, with some local Christians remaining, even as the war turned sectarian elsewhere.

Mother Agnes of the Cross, a Lebanese nun who has mediated between the government and rebels, said on Sunday that the nuns were healthy, though one recently had an asthma attack.

The nuns' odyssey began in September when insurgents entered Maaloula, a town built into steep cliffs where Aramaic, the language of Jesus, is still spoken. They drew ire from government supporters for telling reporters the insurgents had not harmed them or Christian sites. But later — after battles damaged the town and monastery — rebels took them, saying it was for their safety. Tensions ensued among rebels when the Nusra Front decided to impose conditions for their release.

"If you have conditions, then they're abducted," Mother Agnes said late last year.

Young Christian killed and beheaded by jihadists

Homs (Agenzia Fides) (16.01.2014) - Islamist groups have killed and beheaded a young Christian man, seriously wounding another. The incident, which occurred on 8 January, was reported to Fides only now by a priest in the diocese of Homs. The two, Firas Nader (29), and Fadi Matanius Mattah (34), were traveling by car from Homs to the Christian village of Marmarita. A group of five armed jihadists intercepted the vehicle and opened fire on the car. Upon reaching the car, militiamen, noting that Fadi was wearing a cross around his neck, beheaded him. They then took money and documents, leaving Firas on the ground wounded, believing he was already dead. Firas instead managed to escape, reaching the town of Almshtaeih on foot and was then transferred to the hospital in Tartou. Some of the faithful were able to recover the body of Mattah, bringing him to Marmarita, where the local Christian community expressed strong indignation for the horrible act carried out.

According to a statement sent to Fides by Aid to the Church in Need" (ACN), violence against Christians in Syria, is becoming "one of the worst persecutions endured by Christians in this part of the third millennium". According to the latest reports, more than 600,000 Christians - a third of the total Syrian faithful - are internally displaced or living as refugees in neighboring countries. Christian leaders confirm the massive exodus of Christians from Syria, which could seriously jeopardize the future of Christians in the nation.

As ACN in Homs highlights, Marmarita and Hamat, the Syrian population, which includes many Christians, live in severe discomfort and without food, heating, shelter and medicine because of the bitter cold weather that has worsened the humanitarian crisis which exists due to the conflict. (PA)
