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Christian IDPs find refuge in Kurdish north

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ecoi.net summary: Ankawa: Iraqi Christians have fled Baghdad and Mosul towards the northern semi-autonomous Kurdish region; according to UNHCR around 1,000 families have arrived in the Kurdish controlled provinces and Ninewa [ID 151768]

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Christian IDPs find refuge in Kurdish north

ANKAWA, 23 December 2010 (IRIN) - Hundreds of Iraqi Christians are fleeing to the northern semi-autonomous Kurdish region and particularly the town of Ankawa, which has become a safe haven for the country's Christians, thanks to its special status and privileges granted by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

Ankawa, near Erbil, KRG's capital, has a predominantly Christian population and administration, several churches and distinct Assyrian language.

Melissa Fleming, chief spokeswoman for the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said on 17 December that UNHCR offices in Iraq had seen a significant increase in Christians fleeing Baghdad and Mosul to the KRG Region and Nineveh plains in the north.

Fleming said the Christian communities in the two cities had started a "slow but steady exodus" since a deadly attack on 31 October, when 68 people were killed during the storming of Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad during Sunday Mass.

Some 1,000 families have arrived in the Kurdistan region and Ninewa since the beginning of November, according to UNHCR. "We have heard many accounts of people fleeing their homes after receiving direct threats. Some were able to take only a few belongings with them," Fleming said.

"Bagdad has too many evils," Jabir Hikmet Al Sammak, a Christian, said last week in Ankawa at the funeral of his 78-year-old father and 76-year-old mother. They had both been beheaded in their Baghdad home by extremists.

"It's a city of guns," said Al Sammak.

Al Sammak and many other Christian IDPs are now homeless and jobless, living either with their relatives or in rented houses they can hardly afford in Ankawa.

Safe havens

Many areas in the north have been safe havens for religious minorities fleeing violence elsewhere in Iraq, and Erbil is no exception, says the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

According to IOM, there are 6,879 IDP families (about 41,274 individuals) in Erbil governorate and almost a quarter are estimated to be Christians. Initial assessments by IOM staff in Iraq suggest that more Christian families will be arriving in Erbil as soon as they are able to leave their homes and jobs.

"We just came here for security," said Naji Behnan, 57, a church security guard in Ankawa, who earns 240,000 Iraqi dinars (approximately US\$200) a month, but has to pay \$300 rent per month for a house in which his and his son's families live. He came to Ankawa less than two months ago.

Behnan said the two families of six people lived on the money from selling his house and property in Baghdad's Jadid neighbourhood.

"My two sons, who are university graduates, have no jobs," he said. "In Baghdad they were church security guards just like I am here."

IOM's report said access to work was cited as a priority need for 83 percent of IDP families in Erbil.

These people only possess a few items, such as blankets, plastic sheeting and kitchen utensils, as well as some subsistence food donated by international aid organizations, such as UNHCR, IOM and the International Churches of Christ, according to Helene Caux, UNHCR's senior external relations officer in Erbil.

There is criticism that despite pledges over the past two months, neither the Iraqi central government nor KRG has done enough to tackle the plight of Christian IDPs.

More promises

Earlier this month, Massoud Barzani, Kurdistan's president, reiterated his promises to do whatever was possible for Christians coming to Kurdistan, saying leaving Iraq was no solution.

Nawzad Hadi, Erbil's governor, told IRIN that Barzani had created a special committee to look into the needs of displaced Christians and provide them with aid.

"Kurdistan is their home," said Hadi. "As an ethnic minority which suffered in the past, we Kurds can feel the suffering of Christians very well."

However, a Christian official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the Kurdish authorities had told Kurdistan Christians that it was the duty of the Iraqi government, rather than the KRG, to aid the IDPs.

Meanwhile, Christians keep leaving Baghdad, according to the UNHCR's Caux. "The Christian authorities say there are only 150,000 Christians left in Baghdad; one-third of them could be ready to leave," said Caux, pointing to an increase in the migration of Christians abroad since Baghdad's church attack.

Since then, 30 percent of new Iraqi arrivals in Jordan have been Christians, and in Lebanon and Syria, 167 and 55 Iraqi Christian families respectively have approached UNHCR to be registered as refugees, said Caux.