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Iraq: Minority communities in Nineveh appeal for protection

BAGHDAD, 15 November 2009 (IRIN) - Iraq's minority communities in the northern province of Nineveh have appealed to local and national authorities for protection amid warnings of an increase in attacks against them in the run-up to January's national elections.

"As Christians we have been feeling insecure since the 2003 [US-led] invasion as we are subjected to killings, kidnappings, extortion and displacement by different parties due to either political agendas or extremist ideologies," said Ihsan Matti, a 33-year-old taxi driver in Mosul, provincial capital of Nineveh.

Matti said Iraq's security forces were slow to respond to any [anti-Christian attacks](#) and left their communities vulnerable to more violence. "The government still doesn't deal with the threats we face seriously. We are still facing the same threats without any sustainable measures [to counter them]."

Since 2003, minority communities have been [repeatedly attacked](#) by Sunni militants, the majority of whom were affiliated to al-Qaida in Iraq, by their own admission. The militants accuse minorities of being crusaders, devil-worshippers, infidels or traitors for co-operating with US forces.

The main groups of minorities targeted in Nineveh Province are the Shabaks, whose numbers are estimated at 300,000-400,000 and have a religion containing elements of Islam, Christianity and other religions; the Yazidi community, which worships Melek Taus, the Peacock Angel; and Christians, which are made up of Chaldeans, Orthodox, Catholics, Assyrians, Anglicans and Armenians.

The deadliest attack on a minority group was in August 2007 when four truck bombs detonated simultaneously in the small village of Qahataniya, killing more than 300 Yazidis. Some five months before that, truck bombs hit markets in the northwestern city of Tal Afar, killing at least 152 Turkomen people.

In October 2008, a new wave of anti-Christian violence erupted in Mosul when gunmen started attacking Christians and threatening others, forcing them to leave the city either to displacement camps or outside the country.

Government measures

Abdul-Raheem al-Shimari, head of the provincial Security and Defence Committee, warned that such attacks were likely to increase in the province in the run-up to January's national elections, as minority communities had a significant stake in them.

"I do believe that there will be some security disturbances not only for the minority communities but for the whole province as we approach the elections," al-Shimari told

IRIN. "All parties, especially those with influential militias, will have a role in destabilizing the security situation to embarrass the other."

He added that plans were underway to recruit 14,000 new police officers and soldiers from the province. The new recruits are to be spread around Nineveh but with a greater concentration in the areas where minorities live.

"This will help the residents of these areas to protect their communities," al-Shimari said, adding that 50cm-wide trenches were being dug around the Christian towns of Tilkaif and Hamdaniya to prevent car bombs getting in.

Ridha Jawad, 54, of the Shabak community complained of the government's "lax measures", which he said encouraged militants to increase their brazen attacks.

"If there were tough measures from the government against those who attack us, such as arrests and executions, we would never see such an increase in these attacks," Jawad said. "We want quick and effective measures."

"On vulnerable ground"

On 10 November, New York-based NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) shed light on another source of repression for these minority communities in Nineveh; the longstanding territorial dispute between the central government and the Kurdish regional government.

In its 51-page report titled "[On vulnerable ground](#)", HRW said minorities in the disputed northern areas are caught between the semi-autonomous regional authorities of Kurdistan and the central government in Baghdad. It said the ongoing dispute threatens to create a "human rights catastrophe" for these communities.

"The competing efforts to resolve deep disputes over the future of northern Iraq have left the minority communities who live there in a precarious position, bearing the brunt of conflict and coming under intense pressure to declare their loyalty to one side or the other, or face consequences," the report said.

"They have been victimized by Kurdish authorities' heavy handed tactics, including arbitrary arrests and detentions, and intimidation directed at anyone resistant to Kurdish expansionist plans," it added.

The rights watchdog called upon the Iraqi government and the Kurdish regional government to protect minorities and to create an independent body of inquiry to determine those responsible for the orchestrated killings of minorities.

Yazidi community member Hamoo Khalil, 44, said that if the government did not do more to protect them from attacks they would be forced to take matters into their own hands.

"If the situation continues like this we'll find ourselves taking up our own arms to defend our families," said Khalil, a father of six who runs a small supermarket in Baashiq town, about 15km north of Mosul. "I'm afraid that we've reached the point where we have no trust in the government's forces."

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