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Iraq: Christian community faces new wave of violence

BAGHDAD, 15 July 2009 (IRIN) - A new wave of violence targeting Iraq's Christian community has raised questions about the safety of religious minorities amid concerns about Iraqi forces' ability to maintain security after the 30 June withdrawal of US combat forces from cities to outlying bases.

On 12 July, there were five attacks on churches in Baghdad and one assassination in the north that left five dead and more than 20 injured, according to Iraqi Interior Ministry's statements.

"These [systematic] attacks on that specific day mean that there are well-organized militant groups who are still active unleashing violence and terrorism against Iraqis in general and Christians specifically," Younadem Kana, a Christian Iraqi MP, told IRIN.

"Their aim is to send a message to the world that the situation is unstable and the Iraqi government is unable to maintain security after the withdrawal of the US troops," Kana said.

The worst among Sunday's attacks was a car bomb exploding near a church in eastern Baghdad as worshippers were leaving Sunday mass, killing four and injuring 18, the Interior Ministry said. One Muslim was among the dead.

Two bombs targeted another church in western Baghdad with no casualties. Three other churches were also targeted and eight people were injured, according to the Interior Ministry. Aziz Rizqo Nisan, a senior local Christian official, was killed in Kirkuk, about 300km north of Baghdad.

Kana called on the government to offer protection in all places of worship and to increase its intelligence efforts to hunt down militant groups.

A German NGO dealing with vulnerable and threatened communities in Iraq said the attacks were a bid to drive the remaining Christian community out of the country.

"Extremist Islamists are systematically aiming at driving out the remaining 100,000 Assyro-Chaldaic Christians from the Iraqi capital," Kamal Sido, a near-east consultant for the Society for Threatened People ([GfbV](#)), aid in a statement on 13 July.

According to GfbV, more than three-quarters of the approximately 400,000 Christians living in Baghdad have fled the city since the 2003 US-led invasion, due to either direct or indirect threats to their community.

GfbV appealed for urgent support for aid projects for Christians who have been displaced inside Iraq and for those who are refugees in neighbouring Jordan and Syria to help them either return to their homes or resettle in a third country.

According to the World Refugee Survey 2008 by the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, at year's end, Syria hosted some 1.3 million Iraqi refugees, of whom about [20 percent](#) were Christian. The US State Department's International Religious Freedom Report 2008 [states](#) that 16 percent of registered Iraqi refugees in Jordan were Christians.

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Topics: Christian, Freedom of religion,