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Mass exodus from Iraqi towns and cities as ISIS advance prompts panic

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Panic has taken hold in north-western Iraq as tens of thousands of people flee areas where Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) militants are continuing their advance, Amnesty International said.

"The situation for Iraqis in the north-west of the country, especially those from the Yezidi and Christian minority communities, is becoming increasingly dire as both residents and many of those already displaced are now fleeing their homes and places of shelter," said Donatella Rovera, Amnesty International's Senior Crisis Response Adviser, who is currently in northern Iraq.

Thousands of residents of the Christian city of Qaraqosh fled after ISIS arrived overnight, while others told Amnesty International that they were trapped in the town and unable to leave.

Donatella Rovera said: "I met a man yesterday in al-Qosh, a Christian town, who for weeks has been working hard to provide shelter and assistance to displaced people - Christians, Yezidis and other minorities who had fled their homes in the recent days and weeks amid ISIS assaults.

"Today he and his family have themselves become displaced. He broke down in tears as he told me that last night he and his family fled with only the clothes on their backs - with not even time to take their documents. ISIS is now in the town."

In Bashiqa, a majority Yezidi town north of Mosul, residents' long-standing fears of an ISIS attack were realized overnight. The population is now displaced.

As ISIS advanced further east and north of Mosul overnight, thousands fled towards the Iraqi Kurdistan cities of Dohuk and Erbil.

"Many members of minorities are even fleeing areas where there seems to be no imminent danger of an ISIS attack as they are so traumatized by their recent displacement. They are gripped by panic and fear," Donatella Rovera said.

For example, some Yezidis from the Sinjar area, who were forced from their homes at the weekend after ISIS took over the area and who found shelter near Dohuk, are fleeing again. They are now heading for the Turkish border.