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Iraq: Attacks drive thousands of Christians out of Mosul

BAGHDAD, 12 October 2008 (IRIN) - Nearly 750 Christian families, about 3,750 individuals, have fled their homes in Mosul, a city about 400km north of Baghdad, as Sunni Muslim extremists have increased attacks against this religious minority since 4 October, a local official said on 11 October.

"We have registered so far 744 Christian families who left their houses in Mosul due to the recent attacks. Most have ended up either in relatives' houses or churches or monasteries in nearby towns and villages where there are many Christians," said Jawdat Ismaiel, provincial director of the Ministry of Displacement and Migration.

Ismaiel said these new internally displaced persons (IDPs) are distributed in seven towns and villages to the north and east of Mosul, the provincial capital of Ninevah province. He said there were about 200 families in Qaraqoush, 187 families in Tal Skouf, 145 families in Bartila, 96 families in Baashiq, 47 families in Karam Less, 37 families in Tilkaif and 32 families in Alqoush.

Ismaiel added that his teams are visiting all the towns and villages that have offered safe haven to Christian families in order to track their number, which is "increasing dramatically hour after hour".

Aid deliveries

He went on to say that 150 food and aid packages have been distributed so far to these families and at least 50 more were expected to be distributed later on 11 October. Each package includes four bed rolls, four blankets, four pillows, hygiene and kitchen materials, cans of food, lanterns, tomato paste, clothing for adults and children and toothpaste.

In addition, Ismaiel said the displacement ministry is planning to build a makeshift tent camp in Bartila if needed.

An accurate estimation of the Christian population in Iraq is not available but hundreds of thousands of Christians are known to have fled the country since the US-led invasion of the country in 2003 for fear of attacks by both Sunni and Shia religious extremists.

A local police officer in Mosul said that since 4 October police had found seven dead Christians who appeared to have been kidnapped by gunmen and killed execution-style. The latest was a construction worker killed on 8 October.

The officer spoke on condition of anonymity as he was not authorised to speak to media.

Following these recent attacks, Ni'ma Noail, a 50-year-old Christian civil servant, decided to leave his house in Mosul and has ended up in a room in a church in Bartila.

"We left everything behind us. We only took our souls," Noail, a father-of-three, said. "Relatives in other cities and friends in Mosul, including Muslims, advised me to leave after recent events."

He called on the government and US-led forces to "honour their word to offer protection to Christians".

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