

Iraqi archbishop tells USAID delegation to hurry up aid delivery

World Watch Monitor (04.07.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2IUhM26> – An Iraqi Catholic archbishop has said he and other bishops are “delighted” that the US aid arm is to make good on a pledge to send aid directly to non-Muslim communities recovering from ISIS’s occupation of their towns and villages, but warned “time is running [out]”.

Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil, in Kurdistan, addressed his warning to a visiting delegation from the agency, USAID, led by its administrator, Mark Green.

“The time should be now and the help should be immediate and effective,” [Archbishop Warda told the US-based Catholic News Service \(CNS\)](#) after the visit.

Some eight months after it was [announced by Vice President Mike Pence](#), USAID is providing US\$10 million to two umbrella organisations, Catholic Relief Services and Heartland Alliance, to help Christians and Yazidis rebuild their homes and communities after Islamic State’s occupation of the Nineveh Plains region, which ended with the Battle of Mosul in 2017. An additional \$25m of aid has also been pledged.

Last month Pence [ordered Green to fly to Iraq](#) to assess why aid was being held up after Archbishop Warda, who has been

caring for tens of thousands of displaced Christian families since 2014, [told US-based Fox News](#) that much of the pledged aid had not materialised.

Green said on Twitter today (4 July) that he would be presenting President Donald Trump and Pence “with a plan for expediting the delivery of assistance to the most vulnerable communities”. He said USAID was supporting “the safe and dignified return of persecuted religious and ethnic communities in northern Iraq”.

Archbishop Warda told CNS this week that the delegation visited Qaraqosh and other devastated towns which had had large Christian populations before ISIS seized control of the region in 2014. He told CNS the delegation’s message was that “the American government and the Americans do care about the fate of the Christians, Yazidis and the minorities and want to help”.

On 1 July, a high-level US delegation met the prime minister of the semiautonomous Kurdish region, Nechirvan Barzani, who told them that the return of Iraq’s religious and ethnic minorities to their homes would require the help of the international community.

Barzani also suggested that a confidence-building process be launched to encourage Christians and other minorities not to leave Iraq or the Kurdistan Region.

Yesterday [the delegation met the Iraqi Prime Minister](#), Haider Al-Abadi, and according to his Facebook page discussed “cooperation between Iraq and USAID, economic support, the

return of displaced persons, the protection of minorities, and the training of local police”.

As well as Green, the US delegation included the US Ambassador to Iraq, Douglas Silliman; the US Consul General in Erbil, Ken Gross; the US Special Envoy for International Religious Freedom, Ambassador Sam Brownback; the co-chairman of the bipartisan Religious Minorities in the Middle East Caucus, Congressman Jeff Fortenberry; and religious freedom advocate and retired congressman Frank Wolf.

Before USAID officials' visit, Pence spoke to Al-Abadi by telephone and, according to the White House, the pair “conveyed their shared commitment to protecting victims of religious persecution at the hands of ISIS, and discussed USAID administrator Mark Green's upcoming visit to Iraq in support of this effort”.

IS cells continue to carry out insurgent attacks, bombings, ambushes and kidnappings, [Kurdistan 24 reported](#) last week.

According to the UN's refugee agency, 2.1 million Iraqis are displaced within Iraq and, of those, more than 360,000 are living in “informal settlements” such as abandoned buildings. But church leaders fear that if Christians are unable to return to their homes and start rebuilding their lives in safety, they will seek asylum abroad, further diminishing the Christian presence in Iraq and damaging the country's fragile religious diversity. The number of Christians in Iraq has fallen from 1.4m in 1987 to an estimated 2-300,000 today, accelerated by war, instability and targeted sectarian

violence.

More than 100,000 Iraqis – including many Christians – fled Mosul and the Nineveh Plains for Kurdistan in the summer of 2014, after ISIS seized control of large swathes of Iraq and threatened non-Sunni Muslims with death if they did not leave. According to the church committees in the Nineveh Plains, some 8,744 Christian families have returned to nine villages in the area. In addition, 82 Christian families have returned to Mosul.

The Chaldean Catholic patriarch, Cardinal Louis Raphael I Sako, has said about one-third of the Christian families who fled IS have returned home but that infrastructure and security remain inadequate, CNS reported.

Warda said many actors had a role to play in ensuring Christians remained in Iraq. He told CNS that “concerned governments and parties need to bring a dialogue of life, that existed before, back again” to Iraq’s rich cultural mosaic.

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