

# Christians 'excluded' from Iraq's reconstruction plans

See the 88-page Report "Ensuring Equality" published by 16 NGOs at <http://bit.ly/2k1HyXx>

World Watch Monitor (27.01.2017) – Christians are being excluded from the reconstruction plans for northern Iraq, further eroding the likelihood of their return once Islamic State has been militarily defeated there, an alliance of UK-based charities has warned.

Iraqi Christians firmly believe that Iraq is their spiritual homeland; their presence dates back at least to the 3rd Century. Before 2003, there were approximately 1.5 million Christians in Iraq, but estimates now range from 200,000 to 500,000. Approximately 70% of Iraq's Christians are from the Chaldean Catholic tradition, while the remainder are Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian and Protestant.

After the Allied invasion of Iraq, many Christians fled the Baghdad area for the north, where some towns (such as Qaraqosh) had been almost 95% Christian before 2003. It's estimated that at the time Mosul was invaded by Islamic State in June 2014, only about 3,000 Christians were left from the 35,000 there in 2003.

Now the UK coalition of mainly Christian charities working in Iraq and Syria says it's "clear" that leaders of religious minority communities are being excluded from the National Settlement plan being put together by Iraq and other regional powers and presented to the UN.

The 88-page report, Ensuring Equality, which brought together contributions from 16 NGOs, adds that it is vital that Christians and other minority populations have support for their political and security concerns if they are to feel

reassured enough to return to Mosul or the surrounding Nineveh Plains region, rebuild their communities and undertake any reconciliation process.

“This must include full citizenship status and the rebuilding of churches and community centres,” says the report.

Participating charities have repeated the oft-reported claim that Christians are not being supported by the international donor institutions, such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and are having to rely on churches that are trying to run their own aid programmes with limited funds.

The NGOs who contributed include Aid to the Church in Need, the Assyrian Church of the East Relief Fund, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, Syrian Christians for Peace, the Evangelical Christian Alliance Church in Lebanon and the Alliance Church of Jordan.

“All the NGOs involved in this report state that the vast majority of Christians and other ‘minorities’ avoid UNHCR camps and facilities because of continuing discrimination and persecution,” the report says, adding: “It is utterly unacceptable that a place of sanctuary should be a place of fear that repels those it is designed to save and protect.”

However, it says that those who remain outside UNHCR camps “have fared ... unequally in the allocation of international aid, funding, political support, media attention, and asylum placements”.

The report urges the UNHCR to scrap its “need not creed” approach and acknowledge minorities’ particular experiences. It calls on the UNHCR to open more mobile registration units to enable asylum-seekers outside UN camps – who tend to be non-Muslims – to register. It also urges the UNHCR to employ more non-Muslim registration and security staff, and translators, to reduce discrimination against non-Muslims.

It recommends that Western governments giving aid should promote tolerance of minorities by objecting to materials or media outlets that promote extremism, and says the UNHCR should give converts from Islam to Christianity urgent protection, because they “face a high risk of assassination – even at the hands of fellow migrants in Europe”.

The report also recommends that the Balkan states that have expressed a desire to take Christian refugees as part of their “EU allocation” should be helped to do so. “At present this is being undermined by pressure and threats from Germany and the dead hand of political correctness,” it claims.

A similar call for more international aid was issued this week by a 14-member delegation of church leaders, who visited Baghdad and Erbil. The group, brought together by the World Council of Churches, met officials from the Baghdad and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the UN. After a briefing from the UN Humanitarian Co-ordinator in Iraq, Rev. Frank Chikane, moderator of the WCC’s Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, said: “The international donor support is woefully inadequate to meet the continuing need, leaving the host communities and the KRG to carry the burden on their own.”

In the Kremlin, the Russian Foreign Minister on Wednesday (25 Jan.) accused the European Union of “avoid[ing] the discussion on the problems of Christians in the Middle East [by] putting itself under the infamous mask of political correctness”.

Meanwhile the Al-Monitor news website reported last month that the viability of the project for Iraqi national reconciliation, outlined in December in the “national settlement” document, is threatened by its exclusion of the country’s minority populations, such as its Assyrian Christians.

One of Iraq’s few Christian MPs, Yonandam Kanna, secretary-

general of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, told the website that the settlement did not include any clause determining the fate of disputed minority areas, control of which is sought by Arab Iraq and the semi-autonomous Kurdish region – such as the Nineveh Plains for the Christians and Shabaks.

He added: “Minorities do not have a say in this and they are not even allowed to determine their own fate. The settlement does not take into account the views of Christians or Yazidis, or any other less influential minority groups.”

Mr. Kanna has previously criticised the national reconciliation projects put forward by the larger political groups for failing to provide guarantees that people who have committed atrocities against minorities, such as Yazidis and Christians, would be brought to justice.

Another Christian Iraqi MP told a conference in Washington DC last summer that the Iraqi Parliament “does not take minorities into account”.

Global charity Open Doors, with others, has produced a detailed report on the vital contribution that Christians make in Iraq (and Syria). The report’s co-ordinator Rami\* (not his real name) said: “We need recognition for the vital role of the Church in rebuilding and reconciliation.. Maintaining the presence of Christians is not only about them; it is for the good of society as a whole. In the reports and research we’ve conducted, we have mapped, in a way, all the contributions Christians have given to Iraq.”

The report begins: “When Christianity spread across what we now call the Middle East and we see that since then until now Christians have contributed to societies in literacy, in health, in translating and contributing to the Arabic language. Some of the best early centres of learning in the world were founded by Christians. Christians were among the first to introduce charitable works and NGOs. We see them involved in politics, and in the development of the Iraqi

state. Christians are among the most well-known business people. And in the future Christians, alongside other numerical minorities, are vitally important for the stability of [Iraq]. Policy-makers and researchers agree that we need to maintain diversity in order to counter extremism and radicalisation. We need diversity to ensure sustainable peace and lasting stability in the Middle East.”

The way that Open Doors is tackling these issues, Rami told World Watch Monitor in November, involves working with indigenous church leaders, engaging with governments and decision-makers across the globe, and trying to collect One Million Voices in a petition in support of a campaign to bring “Hope to the Middle East”.