

Iraqi Christians nervous after Archbishop's abduction

by Daniel Blake

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Iraq's tiny Christian community is living in fear after the abduction of a Chaldean Archbishop in Mosul, a city in the northern Nineveh province last week.

Armed attackers abducted Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho as he left the Holy Spirit Church on Friday, while his driver and two bodyguards were killed.

A local priest told the Christian persecution news agency Compass Direct that Christians across Iraq had been left shaken by the abduction.

He added that the kidnapers have demanded a large ransom for the release of the Archbishop.

"They want money, but in addition they want to break all the Christians in Mosul," said Father Najeeb Mikhail.

He added that Archbishop Rahho's health had been badly affected by the stress of constant threats from militant gangs demanding extortion money.

"One day before his kidnapping, they attacked the bishop's house in Mosul and broke many things," Fr Mikhail said, adding that the Archbishop had refused to meet the demands of the attackers for money.

The Chaldean Church, which practises an ancient Eastern rite, is aligned with the Roman Catholic Church and recognises the authority of the Pope.

Following the Archbishop's abduction, many of the less than one million Christians in Iraq fear they will be next.

Father Emanuel Youkhana of Christian Aid Program Nohadra Iraq said he expected more Christian families would flee Mosul as a result of the Archbishop's abduction, which follows the murder of a Chaldean priest and three deacons last June, and a series of bomb blasts on Mosul churches in January.

"You might release the bishop, but you cannot recover the confidence of the people," he said. "Within the last two or three months, the church is attacked and then the bishop is kidnapped, so how can people save their confidence?"

Fr Mikhail believes the attacks are not about money but about driving Christians out of the area.

"There are some Muslims that want to put Christians out of Mosul," the priest said. "So through these criminals, they try to intimidate the relationship between Muslims and Christians."

Iraq's Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has written to the Chaldean patriarch of Baghdad and spiritual leader of Iraq's Roman Catholics, Cardinal Emmanuel III Delly, expressing his "deep sadness and grief" over Archbishop Rahho's kidnapping.

In a statement on Tuesday, Maliki's office said, "The prime minister has issued an order to the interior minister and all security officials of Nineveh province to follow the case and work very hard to release (Rahho) as soon as possible."

The statement added, "The Christian sect in Iraq is one of the basic components of Iraqi society and can never be parted from its people and civilisation. Any assault on its sons represents an assault on all Iraqis."

Article from Christian Today:

<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/iraqi.christians.nervous.after.archbishops.abduction/17175.htm>

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"Breaking the News for Compassionate Professionals"

URGENT BREAKING NEWS: Archbishop Kidnapped In Iraq; Three Others Killed

Saturday, 01 March 2008 (6 hours ago)

By BosNewsLife News Center



BAGHDAD, IRAQ (BosNewsLife)-- Pope Benedict XVI on Saturday, March 1, condemned the kidnapping of the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, Paulos Faraj Rahho, and the killing of three people accompanying him, saying it was a "premeditated" and "criminal act."

His comments came shortly after the Syriac Archbishop of Mosul, Baptiste Georges Casmoussa, confirmed that the 65-year old Rahho was seized when he left the Church of the Holy Spirit where he attended the 'Via Crucis' (Way of the Cross), a Catholic devotion commemorating Jesus' last hours before dying at a cross, ahead of Easter.

Police suggested his two body guards had tried to prevent the kidnapping Friday, February 29, but they and the driver were killed in the shoot out in the the eastern al-Nur district. On Saturday, March 1, security forces fanned out across Mosul searching for the archbishop, with one senior police reportedly saying that a special team tightened security "especially around the Al-Nur district."

Pope Benedict XVI was "immediately informed of the tragic episode," the Vatican press office said in a statement released by Vatican Radio. "Monsignor Rahho had just concluded the celebration of the 'Way of the Cross' a religious rite that is of dear and particular significance to the faithful of Iraq. This leads one to think that this criminal act was premeditated," the press office said in the statement on behalf of the pope.

DEEP WOUNDS

"Embittered by this latest execrable act, which deeply wounds the entire Church in the country and in particular the Chaldean Church, the Pope feels close to" the church leadership and "and all of the Christian community, which has been severely tested, as well as the families of the victims," the Vatican said.

The pope has urged all believers "to unite in fervent prayer so that reason and humanity may prevail in the minds of the authors of this attack and that Monsignor Raho is restored to the care of his flock as soon as possible," said the statement, monitored by BosNewsLife. The pope also said he hopes the "Iraqi people may find the path to reconciliation and peace".

Speaking from Mosul, monsignor Casmoussa said they are awaiting further news from the kidnapers. Rabban al-Qas, the bishop of the northern Iraqi cities of Irbil and Amadiyah, said in published remarks that the church was especially concerned because Rahho has health problems. He did not elaborate, The Associated Press (AP) news agency reported.

CHRISTIANS FLEE

Iraq's Christians, with the Chaldean rite by far the largest community, were said to number at least 750,000 before the US-led invasion nearly five years ago. The number today is believed to have dropped to half that figure, due to violence. Churches, priests and business owned by Christians have been attacked by Islamic militants and many have fled the country.

Last June, the pope expressed deep concern about the plight of Christians caught in the deadly sectarian crossfire in Iraq and pressed President Bush in a meeting to keep their safety in mind. "Particularly in Iraq, Christian families and communities are feeling increasing pressure from insecurity, aggression and a sense of abandonment," Benedict said at the time.

Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has pledged to protect and support the Christian minority, The Associated Press (AP) news agency reported. While many areas of Iraq witnessed a decrease of violence over the past six months, the US military regards Mosul as the last urban stronghold of al-Qaeda in Iraq, The Associated Press (AP) news agency reported Saturday, March 1.

In an interview with AsiaNews, a Vatican-affiliated missionary news agency, in November, Rahho said the situation in Mosul, 360 kilometers (225 miles) northwest of Baghdad, was not improving and "religious persecution is more noticeable than elsewhere because the city is split along religious lines." He reportedly said that "Everyone is suffering from this war irrespective of religious affiliation, but in Mosul Christians face starker choices. "

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