

Agencies in Iraq reduce operations: Cite escalation of hostilities

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Church aid agencies working in Iraq are pulling out international staff, reviewing their programs in the face of continuing violence, and in at least one instance considering suspending operations altogether, the Geneva-based Action by Churches Together (ACT) International alliance announced last month.

"The hostage-taking in Iraq, combined with an escalation of hostilities in general, have compelled DanChurchAid to seriously reconsider its international presence in Iraq [in the city of Basra]," said Lennart Skov-Hansen, relief coordinator of the Danish aid agency which is a member of ACT, a global network of churches and relief organizations.

"The security situation has deteriorated during the last couple of weeks," Skov-Hansen said in an ACT statement April 22. "There is little expectation that the situation might improve much before July 1, when the coalition force is handing over the governing of the country to the Iraqi people."

Another ACT member, the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC), is continuing its program in Iraq, as is the Middle East Council of Churches. But one IOCC international staff member had been "pulled out temporarily from Baghdad due to the deteriorating security situation and the growing threat on the lives of foreigners after a number of kidnapping incidents," ACT reported.

All foreign staff of Norwegian Church Aid based either in Basra or Baghdad have been temporarily withdrawn, though Iraqi staff in the two cities continue implementing programs.

Meanwhile, ACT member Christian Aid reported that a survey it had commissioned showed that life is worse for many poor people in Iraq. "Poor Iraqis suffered enormously under Saddam Hussein's regime, yet the present stage of reconstruction is in some ways even more difficult." *-Ecumenical News International*