

# Flight of Iraqi Christians cannot dim churches' witness, leaders say

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Geneva, February 18 (ENInews)-- Declarations of "mission accomplished" and U.S. troop withdrawals notwithstanding, Iraqi Christians continue to flee because their safety cannot be guaranteed and there is little hope their lives will improve soon, six Iraqi church leaders said on 18 February during the meeting of the World Council of Churches Central Committee.

"It is more difficult for all the people of Iraq, but especially for Christians," said Archbishop Georgis Sliwa of the Armenian Church of Iraq. "Those remaining are not feeling any security, especially politically, and have no hope for their children's futures."

The six Iraqi leaders were in Geneva, said Patriarch Addai II, to solicit help from the ecumenical community. "We work very hard with the Iraqi government about violence and struggles and how to end it so people can come back," Addai said. "When we don't get an answer, we turn to our friends elsewhere for support. Our hope is that all who left will return once conditions – safety, stability, infrastructure – are in place, but right now we have little hope and the urgency now is for those still in Iraq," he added.

To create those conditions, Sliwa said, requires "international advocacy to stop terrorist activities so all citizens will feel safe and secure and to demand investigations why acts of violence happened and who was responsible."

All Iraqis "must work to empower the strength" of the fledgling Iraqi government, Sliwa continued. "Our constitution guarantees equal rights for all Iraqis. Strengthening the government will make it possible to protect all our people," he said.

The Rev. Yousif Al-Saka of the Presbyterian Church of Baghdad said he does not expect the political unrest sweeping through the Arab world to affect Iraq. "The regimes in all those countries are dictatorial while we are a constitutional system," he explained. "The main problem in Iraq for all the departures is social security. If we want people, especially Christians, to return, we have to establish security."

The Iraqi church leaders hailed the support of their ecumenical partners around the world.

Attendance at the Baghdad church pastored by Archbishop Avak Asadourian of the Armenian Church of Iraq has declined by 85 percent in the last five years, but he said that "we have very good relations with the Catholics and the mainline Protestants." However, he added, "we have question marks about para-churches because they proselytize people who are already Christians – every Iraqi Christian is already a church member."

Said Archbishop Severius Hawa of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Baghdad: "These [para-church] groups are not churches and they create groups, not churches. This disfigures the image of the church in Iraq."

Though their numbers are depleted, the churches' witness in Iraq persists. Regular worship services still take place, Asadourian said, "but they are quieter and we have some police protection."

Diaconal work continues, as well. "Diaconia work is very active, because of the need," Asadourian said. "It is the Christian women who visit the homes. They help families with medical help, monetary aid, food, housing. The need is very sharp so there is frequently not enough." The church, said Sliwa, "is the spiritual refuge of the people."

The Christian churches in Iraq are not about to give up, they said. "Despite all the difficulties, we are hopeful because we are Christians," said Asadourian, "and we love our country."