

Christian leaders say Middle East Christians must not be forgotten

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox leaders joined forces on Wednesday (May 7) to call for an end to the silence over persecuted Christian communities in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria.

“What we are seeing here is ecumenical cleansing,” said Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, who called the region “the unsafest place in the world for Christians.”

“It’s an ecumenical cleansing that is forcing people who are Christians, by whatever label, out of countries where their roots are from the beginning.”

Anderson and others were joined on Capitol Hill by the co-chairs of the Religious Minorities in the Middle East Caucus, Reps. Frank Wolf (R., Va.), and Anna Eshoo (D., Calif.), who have pushed for the appointment of a special envoy focused on Middle East religious minorities.

More than 180 clergy, seminary professors, authors and activists have signed a “pledge of solidarity and call to action” that advocates for the special envoy in addition to a regional review of U.S. foreign aid to ensure recipients uphold principles of pluralism and religious freedom. They also seek assurance that religious minorities receive fair access to U.S. refugee assistance.

“The current trajectory, marked by political violence and, in the cases of Iraq and Syria, full-blown war, risks a Middle East largely emptied of the millennia-old presence of Christians,” reads the statement, citing cases of executed Christians, demolished churches, kidnapped clergy and forced conversions.

Wolf said he hopes the clergy involvement will help call greater attention to the plight of Christians and other religious minorities who are facing an “existential crisis

which threatens their very survival.”

The Rev. Andrew White, a chaplain at St. George’s Anglican Church in Baghdad, said the people he sees at a church-related clinic wonder if Christians in the West have forgotten them. He said the number of Christians in Iraq has dropped from a high of 1.5 million to about 200,000.

Members of his congregation are leaving, and he has personally been shot at and kidnapped, and rebuilt his church after a bombing.

“So many have gone. All the time they leave and, I confess, I cry because my loved ones are leaving,” he said. “I used to say, ‘I’m not leaving you. Don’t you leave me.’ I can’t say that anymore because I know if my loved ones stay, they might be killed. I know that if my loved ones remain, the chance of them surviving is very little.”

Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl said that if people wonder how atrocities like this violence and persecution can be occurring, it is because others are silent.

“If history has any lesson to teach us about silence, it’s not a good one,” he said, urging both the churches and lawmakers to take action to protect the religious freedom of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East.

Archbishop Oshagan Cholyan of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America said that while there has been humanitarian aid from the West, there has not been enough attention to the growing discrimination and hardship facing Mideast Christians.

“It is not an exaggeration to state that today Christians in the Middle East are experiencing one of the darkest days since the persecutions during the early years of Christianity,” he said.

Jerry Johnson, president of the National Religious Broadcasters, held up his phone and played a clip of Egyptian television’s coverage of a Christian who was beheaded.

“They should not have their head cut off, they should not be stoned, their houses and their churches should not be burned,” he said, “and when they are, we must speak up and tell these stories.”