

Yazidis thank Pope Francis for his support at Vatican meeting

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January 8, 2015

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) An estimated 5,000 Yazidi women are being held as slaves by militants from the self-declared Islamic State, Pope Francis was told when he met a top-level delegation of Yazidi leaders at the Vatican on Thursday (January 8).

The delegation was led by Tahseen Said Al Baig, the Yazidis' secular leader, and Sheikh Kato, the group's supreme spiritual leader, or "Baba Sheikh," the Vatican said in a statement.

Yazidi officials from northern Iraq, Georgia, and Germany were also among the delegation that met the pope for 30 minutes inside the Apostolic Palace.

Yazidis are a Kurdish-speaking people who follow an ancient religion blending elements of Zoroastrianism, Islam, Christianity, and local folk beliefs. There are an estimated 1.5 million Yazidi people in the world, with around 500,000 in Iraq and others in Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, and elsewhere, the Vatican said.

At their unique conical temples, Yazidis worship a peacock deity called Melek Taus and hold elaborate ceremonies that involve fire and water.

The pope has spoken out several times in support of thousands of Yazidi people who, like their Christian neighbors, have been forced to flee their homes due to the wave of Islamist violence sweeping through Iraq and Syria.

"The Holy Father reassured the delegates of his spiritual closeness and his support during this trying time," the Vatican's chief spokesman, Federico Lombardi, said in the statement.

Lombardi said one visitor described Francis as the "father of the poor" as the delegation thanked the pope for his support for the thousands facing persecution

and suffering.

Last month, the pope delivered a video message in support of tens of thousands of minority Yazidi and Christian refugees who fled Islamic State militants in August, many of them trapped on a mountain before they escaped to the Iraqi city of Irbil.

“Christians and Yazidis have been forced out of their homes, they have had to abandon everything to save their lives, but they have not denied their faith,” Francis said at the time. “As religious leaders, we are obliged to denounce all violations of the human dignity.”