

Muslim leaders decry church attacks in Iraq: Car bombs targeted five churches

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After the first-ever coordinated attacks on Iraq's minority Christian population on the first Sunday in August, Muslim and church leaders alike condemned the car bombings, and observers wondered whether the terrorist strikes might have failed to achieve an apparent goal of creating religious division.

Car bombs targeted four churches in Baghdad and one in Mosul as worshipers gathered for evening mass. At least half of those killed were Muslims who lived near the churches.

The most senior Shi'ite Muslim cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, and other Iraqi leaders urged national unity. Sistani labeled the attacks "outrageous" and "flagrant crimes." The Association of Sunni Muslim Scholars said the bombings were "totally remote from any religious or humanitarian norms."

Iraqi officials blamed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an al-Qaeda ally who officials say has orchestrated much of the violence in the 15-month insurgency. At least 11 people were killed by the blasts, officials said.

"Zarqawi and his extremists are basically trying to drive a wedge between Muslims and Christians in Iraq," Iraqi national security adviser Mowafaq al-Rubaie told the Reuters news agency. "It's clear they want to drive Christians out of the country."

The ethnically diverse Christians, mostly Catholic and Orthodox, may make up 3 percent of Iraqis, although their ranks have thinned from emigration. Those who might want to leave now need visas and often lack the funds to do so, according to news reports. Still others want to persevere in their native land.

"Christians are an integral part of the society they are living in, they are not newcomers, they are not there for any superficial reason," said Bishop Nareg

Alemezian of the Armenian Apostolic Church. "Middle Eastern Christians are the people of the land where Christ was born."

The World Council of Churches and the Vatican decried the attacks. "This action further undermines efforts to rebuild Iraq as a democratic society where all religious communities and peoples can live in harmony," said Samuel Kobia, WCC general secretary. The bombings damaged the offices of the humanitarian group ACT (Action by Churches Together) and the Middle East Council of Churches.

Pope John Paul II sent a message of condolence to Iraqi Christians. "In this hour of trial, I am spiritually close to the church and to Iraqi society, and I renew . . . my firm commitment to the establishment of a climate of peace and reconciliation as soon as possible in that beloved country."

In Washington, the Council on American-Islamic Relations decried the attacks as a perversion of Islam. "Harming those engaged in religious worship violates the principles of all faiths," the group said in a statement.