

Iraqi Christians forced to flee homes or risk death

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Islamic militants increasingly target them in Baghdad

By JAMES PALMER - Newhouse News Service

BAGHDAD, IRAQ — Nabil Comanny and his family endured the dead bodies left to decompose along the road in their southern Dora neighborhood.

They accepted the criminal gangs that roamed the area, searching for targets to kidnap. And neither the utility failures nor the mountains of trash in the street could drive them away.

As Christians, the Comannys had learned to keep a low profile. They even stayed in their house after many Muslim neighbors fled the daily chaos when sectarian bloodshed between Shiite and Sunni militants broke out in 2006, making this one of Baghdad's most embattled districts.

But the hand-scrawled note at their door was the final straw. The message commanded the family to select one of these options:

1. Convert to Islam.
2. Pay a fee of nearly \$300 monthly for "protection."
3. Leave the area.

Failure to comply with one of the three would result in death.

"We don't have weapons, and the government doesn't protect us. What else can we do?" said Comanny, a 37-year-old journalist whose family abandoned its modest home of 11 years.

Extreme Islamic militants increasingly are targeting Christians in Iraq, especially here in the capital. As a result, Iraq's Christian community — long the minority in a largely Muslim country — continues to dwindle.

Islamic law imposed

Comanny said the first sign of trouble for his family arrived last spring when Muslim militants imposed Islamic law over the area. The proclamation came via an 18-point document posted along shops and blast walls. The decree listed stringent rules for all residents.

Among other things, women were required to wear burqas, which are draped over the head, covering the face and entire body.

"It's not our tradition," Comanny said. "How can Christian women be expected to do this?"

In the end, most Christian families decided to pay a bribe, Comanny said, "because it gave them time to prepare to leave. But most can't afford to keep paying."

Comanny, who shared a small house in Dora with his mother, three brothers and four sisters, finally decided to move his family on the advice of someone he described as a "sympathetic" insurgent — a lifelong acquaintance.

Because militants in Dora frequently attack families returning home to fetch their belongings, Comanny paid his insurgent contact 1 million Iraqi dinars, or about \$800, for safe passage from the neighborhood.

Cautious among Shiites

Today, the Comannys live in the New Baghdad section of the capital, where hundreds of Christian families relocated. The families move cautiously among a majority Shiite population who rely on the Mahdi army to protect the area.

Christians in Dora once mixed easily with Muslims, sharing cookies at Christmastime and joining Muslims at Iftar dinners — the sunset feast breaking the daily fast during Ramadan.

Amer Awadish, a 47-year-old taxi driver, said those relationships are what saved his life.

After a handwritten note was delivered to his apartment in December ordering him and his wife, Samia, 48, to leave within two days, a lifelong neighbor appeared at his door. The man, Awadish said, advised him to leave immediately.

"This man used to kiss my mother on the forehead in public," Awadish said, referring to a common gesture of respect toward elderly women. "He was too ashamed to kill me because of that."

In addition to the direct threats, Iraq's Christians also must cope with subtle obstacles.

William Warda, the founder of Hamorabi, a Christian-led national human rights group in Iraq, said most Christians here no longer feel safe embracing the lifestyle they once enjoyed.

"They can't drink alcohol, or even dress in the fashion they're accustomed," Warda said. "Maybe they can stand this for a year or two, but not their whole lives."

Most Christians still in Iraq are Chaldean Catholics who acknowledge the pope's authority but remain sovereign from the Vatican. Other denominations include Syrian Catholics, Armenian Orthodox and Armenian Catholics. Small groups of Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholics also practice, as do Anglicans and Evangelicals.

One common thread among most of the groups is a concern church leaders have not spoken out to protect their rights.

"The church is not defending us," said Bashar Jamil John, a 24-year-old engineering student at the Baghdad Technical Institute. "This is part of the problem."

Priests also threatened

The Chaldean Catholic patriarch, Emmanuel Delly, the Vatican's representative in Iraq, declined to be interviewed, but the Rev. Mokhlous Shasha, 32, a first-year priest at the Lady of Our Salvation Syrian

Catholic Church in central Baghdad, argued the clergy here are as equally threatened as the ones they serve.

"Priests live in the same situations as their parishioners," said Shasha, who added he never walks the streets of Baghdad in his collar.

Since 2006, militants have killed three priests and kidnapped 10 others, church officials said.

The one thing most Christians agree on is their view of the future: bleak.

While at least a dozen churches here simply have closed, some seminaries and nunneries have shifted their bases to the north. For those still open, such as the Chaldean Catholic Virgin Mary in central Baghdad, attendance at Masses is down by more than half, officials said.

For one, Hamorabi's Warda predicts a mass exodus of Christians from Iraq if Western countries relax their immigration policies.

"If the U.S. and Europe open their doors, the Christians in Iraq will be finished," Warda said. "They will all leave."

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