

Body of kidnapped Chaldean Archbishop found

2008-03-16

MOSUL (AFP) - The body of a kidnapped Chaldean Catholic archbishop was found in northern Iraq on Thursday, sparking outrage from Shiite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and other world leaders and expression of sadness from Pope Benedict XVI.

"Yes, we found his body," Iraqi interior ministry spokesman Brigadier General Abdel Karim Khalaf told AFP, speaking of Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho.

A report from Rome had said the body of Rahho was found in a shallow grave near Mosul after abductors telephoned the auxiliary archbishop of Baghdad, Shlemon Warduni.

Rahho, 65, was kidnapped on February 29 after a shootout in which three of his companions were killed.

While it was not yet known whether he died from natural causes or was killed, Maliki and others were treating the death as murder.

The Iraqi premier "received with deep sorrow and sadness news of the killing of the archbishop by criminal terrorist gangs," Maliki said in a statement.

"We consider it as an attack aimed at provoking strife between Iraq's communities. We share the sorrow and renew our support for the Christian community in Iraq. We stress that those who committed this brutal act will not escape justice."



White House spokesman Tony Fratto said "we offer our condolences to the church on the murder of the Chaldean archbishop in Iraq.

"This demonstrates the brutality that the civilised world faces from extremists, and we urge Iraqis to stand together under a modern constitution that protects people from all faiths."

The French foreign ministry said "France condemns with the greatest firmness this odious act."

Rahho's death was also slammed by Muslim leaders in Iraq, both Sunni and Shiite.

The Muslim Scholars Association, a powerful Sunni group, condemned the death and described it as "a crime intending to divide Iraqis and tear apart their social fabric."

"The Christian religion is part of the Iraqi people's faith. Christians have rights as everyone else," a statement said.

Salah al-Obeidi, a senior aide of powerful Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, also came out against those behind the kidnapping.

"We condemn this criminal act which has no relation with Islam. We offer our deepest condolences to our Christian brothers," he told AFP.

Pope Benedict XVI reacted with "deep sadness" to the news of Rahho's death, a Vatican spokesman said.

"The most absurd and unjustified violence continues to afflict the Iraqi people and in particular the small Christian community whom the pope ... holds in his prayers ... in this time of deep sadness," Father Federico Lombardi said.

The Italian Roman Catholic Church's SIR news agency, quoting Archbishop Warduni, said the kidnappers had telephoned to say that Rahho had died and that they had buried him.

"The kidnappers had told us already (Wednesday) that Monsignor Rahho was very ill, and yesterday afternoon they told us that he died. This morning, they telephoned us to say they had buried him," Warduni said, adding that the kidnappers indicated the location of the body.

"We still don't know whether he died from his poor health or was killed," Warduni said. "The kidnappers only told us that he was dead."

Major General Khalid Abdul Sattar, spokesman for the Nineveh province security plan, told Al-Iraqiya state television the archbishop may have been dead for some days.

"The medical report shows the body had started decaying, indicating he has been dead for more than 72 hours," Sattar said.

Raban al-Qas, the head of the Chaldean church in the northern Kurdish region, said there was no trace of any bullet wounds in Rahho's body.

However, it had not yet been determined whether the archbishop had been tortured to death, he said.

"There is no trace of any bullets in his body but the important thing is that he died as a result of the kidnapping," Qas told AFP.

"He is an old man and they put him in the car trunk. We don't know if he was tortured to death or died from natural causes."

Sattar too confirmed the body had no injury marks or bullet wounds.

The funeral was expected to be held in Mosul on Friday.

Rahho was the latest in a long line of Chaldean clerics to be abducted since the US-led invasion five years

ago.

Two priests were kidnapped in the city in October, and last June a priest and three deacons were attacked in front of their church.

Iraq's Christians, with the Chaldean sect by far the largest community, were said to number as many as 800,000 before the invasion.

<http://www.afp.com/english/news/stories/newsmlmmd...html>

Related Links:

- [Mourners attend funeral of Chaldean archbishop \(*International Herald Tribune*\)](#)
- [Chaldean Archbishop of Mosul \(*The Independent*\)](#)
- [Weeping Christians bury Iraqi archbishop \(*AFP*\)](#)
- [Statement on the death of the Chaldean Archbishop of Mosul \(*World Council of Churches*\)](#)
- [Iraq: death of the Chaldean archbishop of Mosul \(*France Diplomatie*\)](#)