

## **Defenceless in Dora: the latest twist in anti-Christian violence in Iraq**

Country/Region: IRAQ

It was in 1999 that I first went to Dora, which for many centuries has been a strongly Christian area of Baghdad. Visiting a block of flats, I saw the appalling poverty of the Christian community. Like most of the Iraqi population they were suffering the effects of the UN sanctions, but in addition Christians had to cope with the hostility of Muslims who blamed the Christians for what were seen as "Western" sanctions

and the intolerable deprivations which they created. The hostility was at this time kept in reasonable check by the tight security of Saddam's regime.

### **Take my last son away with you**

In the company of a government interpreter I called on a Christian woman and her teenage son. Her living room had only a table and a few chairs - everything else had been sold to try to survive. When we entered she spoke to the interpreter and then started to cry. I learned that she was pleading for me to take her son back to Britain with me. "I had six sons," she explained. "The five eldest have all died fighting in Saddam's wars [the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s and the Gulf War of 1990-1]. My husband also died in the military. Next year my youngest son will be old enough to be called up, and most likely he too will be killed."

I stood containing my emotion as this lady spoke with great courage, knowing what she said would be reported back by the interpreter to the intelligence service. I could do nothing to help her, for it was impossible for me to take her son away with me. What has become of her and her son, and of other Christians like them whom I came to know on my various visits to Iraq?

### **Pay, convert, leave or die**

Since the war of 2003 the anti-Christian hostility in the country has increased immeasurably, and there is no longer the strong hand of Saddam to prevent the men of violence from doing as they please. In response to raging anti-Christian violence, huge numbers of Iraqi Christians have fled their homes. A few have chosen another option and converted to Islam. It is next to impossible to continue to live in Baghdad as a Christian.

Many Christians in Dora are now facing demands for the traditional Islamic tax on non-Muslim minorities, the jizya. This is not being imposed by the government, but by Islamist insurgents who are operating freely in Dora without any intervention by either Iraqi or American forces. In keeping with the teaching of shari'a (Islamic law), Christians are offered the choice of paying money (which will be used to fund the insurgent violence), converting to Islam, leaving the area, or being killed. The demands can come as written messages delivered to their home, or from militants knocking on the door. Sometimes the option of paying jizya is not offered - it is then a choice of convert to Islam, flee within 24 hours leaving their homes to be seized by the militants, or be killed.

Christians in Mosul have also been facing demands for jizya.

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### **"We are not here to protect you" - American commander**

A letter from an Iraqi Christian organization in the West addressed to the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, dated 11th May 2007, urges Mr Ban to ask the US and Iraqi governments to protect the minorities in Iraq and work for peaceful coexistence.

It brings to mind a later visit I made to Baghdad, when I sat with a minister in his church in the central market place (an area which has since suffered dreadfully from bombing). He told me how the Christians were being systematically attacked and how he had visited the local American commander to beg for protection for Christians. The answer he got was, "We are not here to protect you." Together with other church leaders he visited the senior American general with the same request. But the general simply sent them back to the local commander who repeated his statement, "We are not here to protect you."

The Christian community in Iraq has been left unprotected and vulnerable. Last year I visited the American Congress and spoke with senior officials and also spoke with US military leaders in Iraq. I discussed the future of the Christian community in Iraq, a community which is facing genocide at the hands of Islamic militants determined to eliminate the Christian presence in Iraq. The same answer was given to me in each case: "We cannot protect the Christians."

If the coalition forces refuse to protect Christian communities, if they overthrow a dictator in order to bring democracy, if this democracy leads to the imposition of shari'a, to ethnic cleansing, to dispossession of property, and ultimately to genocide of a section of the community, then the coalition governments must bear the moral responsibility for a tragedy which they have allowed to happen.

### **Speaking out**

Christians cannot stand by and allow this genocide to take place, as we did during the Armenian genocide of a century ago, and as we did during the Sudanese civil war which had killed two million mainly Christian Southerners by the time it ended in 2005. Christians cannot sacrifice their brothers and sisters in Iraq. Neither political expediency, nor support for our own governments "right or wrong", nor the goal of inter-faith relations with Islam can take precedence over the desperate needs of our fellow Christians. There comes a time when Christians must stand in solidarity with their brethren, must speak out for them and for justice and righteousness.

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