

## Living With the War

Country/Region: IRAQ

### News from the Christian Community Inside Iraq

On 31 March Bartulla, a Christian village just 12 km from Mosul, was bombed when Coalition planes hit the local Ba'ath Party headquarters. Reports state that approximately 20 Christians were killed and 75 wounded in this tragedy which thankfully has so far been an isolated incident.

One of Barnabas Fund's partners spoke with Christian leaders from over seventy churches across Iraq last Thursday, before the targeting of the Iraqi telecommunications systems made contact by phone virtually impossible.

Iraq's 700,000 strong Christian community, approximately half of whom reside in areas under the control of Saddam Hussein's regime, and half in the Kurdish authority areas of the north, have been suffering alongside their Muslim neighbours in the war in Iraq. Until the bombing of Bartulla they had been largely spared the tragic casualties of war suffered by many Iraqi civilians, with only one Christian woman injured in a bombing raid. The main problem for both Christian and Muslim Iraqis is the distress and psychological pressure caused by bombing which is occurring 24 hours per day in some areas. People are very afraid, sleep is difficult, children are distressed and crying. The experience is very traumatic, and anxiety levels are high.

Schools were closed a month ago on government instructions, and there have been many reports of weapons and ammunition being stored in these civilian buildings. This is causing worry because of the likelihood that they will be targeted for an air attack. It seems that the Coalition bombing campaign is largely successful in hitting only military targets but this is still producing collateral damage, even when a missile doesn't go astray. The Air Command Centre in Baghdad was destroyed but it is situated in a Christian area of the city and much damage was suffered. One senior Christian leader had the windows and doors of his home blown in by the blast.

Saddam Hussein has instructed the general public to stay at home. It is forbidden for people to gather in groups and there are armed men on street corners to enforce this edict. Even without this order the constant bombing is also causing people to stay at home and shelter as best they can. Consequently church attendance was already difficult and many churches had stopped all services apart from Sunday and Friday mornings.

Many Christians have left Baghdad to return to their ancestral homelands in the north of Iraq until the war is over. The refugees from Baghdad are being housed in churches, schools and people's homes. Some Christians have also fled into Syria. The government has threatened to execute those who fled and seize the homes they left behind.

Three months of government food rations were distributed in late February. It should be noted that the monthly ration is actually only sufficient for 20 days, so stocks at home will not last much beyond the end of April unless they have been supplemented. Rations are heavy on carbohydrates but contain little in the way of protein, although sometimes they include some beans. There is therefore concern about long-term health. Those who have fled Baghdad for the north were of course limited in the quantity of food they could take with them. The price of food has risen considerably, especially in the north.

Alongside the general grief and distress both Muslim and Christian Iraqis are suffering, Christians have the added fear that they could be made the innocent victims of revenge attacks from angry Muslim neighbours who associate them with the "Christian" West.

Please Pray:

1. Pray for a swift end to the conflict in Iraq with a minimum loss of life on all sides. Pray for the grieving relatives of those who have died, both civilians and soldiers, and for healing and recovery for those who have been injured.
2. Pray for the rebuilding and recovery of Iraq. Ask that a stable and just regime will be established in the country which takes account of both local and international sensitivities, treats all its people with justice and equality and is open and accountable for its actions.
3. Pray that a swift end to the crisis in Iraq will bring in its wake reconciliation and stability between the West and the Islamic world, that tensions will abate and radicalism subside.
4. Pray for protection for vulnerable local Christians in Iraq and other countries in the Islamic world. Pray that they will not become the innocent victims of Muslim anger over the war. Pray for protection and for good relations with Muslim neighbours.