



Barnabas Fund

IRAQ UPDATE

December 2007

Situation Report Iraq

A measure of stability has come to certain parts of Iraq recently, but this has not improved the situation of Christians. Some Iraqi refugees from Syria have returned to their homeland, but no Christians are reported amongst those returning. "As Christians we suffer double because we are an easy target," said one church leader to Barnabas Fund earlier this month. He explained that Christians were targeted not only by Islamic militants but also by criminals, for two reasons. Christians are peaceable and will not retaliate against those who attack them. Furthermore, Christians care for each other so, if one is kidnapped and a huge ransom demanded, other Christians will give money to help the relatives try to meet the ransom demand. Kidnappers therefore consider Christians to be lucrative targets.

However, there is some good news as well. On Thursday, 15 November, St. John's Church reopened in Baghdad with a communion service. The church had been shuttered for six months after the nearby St. George's Church had been severely damaged, and church leaders in the north of the country had been kidnapped, tortured and executed. St. John's Church is located in the district of Dora, which used to be home to many Christians. Over 50% of the Christians have fled from Dora because of Islamic threats and violence and their houses are now occupied by Muslims. However, the Christians attending the service were joined by local Muslims who wanted to show their support and encourage their Christian neighbours.



The cross has been raised again on this church in Baghdad

Focus on Basra

Islamic militias in Basra, in the south of Iraq, are telling Christian women to cover their hair with the Islamic headscarf (hijab) or be killed. Some threats are made personally as militia men approach individual women, others are public messages in the form of graffiti. "Whoever disobeys will be punished. God is our witness that we have conveyed this message," ran one threat in red paint on a wall. A mobile phone advertisement showing an (unveiled) mother and child was defaced, obliterating the woman's head, with the words "No, no to unveiled women" sprayed below. The threats are deadly serious, and more than 40 women in Basra have been murdered by the militias in the last five months. In one case, two children (aged 11 and 6) were murdered along with their unveiled mother.

The bullet-riddled bodies of two Basra Christians, a brother and sister, were found on a rubbish dump on 10 December. Gunmen had kidnapped the brother Osama (aged 31) the previous day and told him to telephone his sister Maison (aged 41) and ask her to meet him. According to reports, a local commander of the Mehdi Army Shi'a militia had taken a fancy to their home in the city centre. This double murder has made the Christian community in Basra extra fearful, and quenched their Christmas celebrations. A senior church leader in the city has asked Christians not to put up trees or exchange gifts, just to attend the Christmas church services. The number of Christians in Basra has dropped from 20,000 before the 2003 invasion to 3,000 now as many have fled the violence. British forces handed over control of security in Basra to the Iraqi authorities on 16 December.

How you have helped	Mar '03 - May '07	Jun '07 - Dec '07	Total
Iraqi Christians in Iraq	£822,983	£172,850	£995,833
Iraqi Christian refugees in Jordan and Syria	£460,005	£203,875	£663,880
Total for food and basic needs	£1,282,988	£376,725	£1,659,713

Making a difference: Examples from Syria

The number of Iraqi Christians fleeing to Syria has increased dramatically over the last six months. Some refugees come from Dora, elsewhere in Baghdad or from Mosul. Some have received threatening letters, others have had family members kidnapped or killed. Muslims say, "Why buy Christian property? They will leave and we can take it for free." A Syrian Christian leader co-ordinating Barnabas Fund aid for Iraqi refugees told us last month: "You can try to imagine the situation, and know that it is worse."

Eighty to 100 Christian families continue to arrive per month. Over recent months, prices for food and rent have spiralled upwards as more and more families seek refuge in Syria. For example, the cost for basic food such as milk, oil or potatoes has risen by around 300%, and the rent for a two-bedroom flat has increased from £40 to £150-£200 per month.

Jobs are more and more difficult to find. Also, people leaving Iraq now are poorer than those who left soon after the invasion of 2003.



Iraqi refugees in Syria waiting for distribution of aid, provided by Barnabas Fund



Handing out food supplies

Thanks to the generosity of supporters like you, Barnabas Fund is able to continue assisting Iraqi Christians in Syria (as well as in Iraq and Jordan). One church leader writes: "Your continuing support has given encouragement to these suffering families and, importantly, confidence that their Christian brothers and sisters all around the world and their local church have not abandoned them but indeed care for them."

There are a considerable number of elderly people among the Iraqi refugee families. Also there are many who suffer from various long-term illnesses or have disabilities and are in need of medication. Barnabas Fund is assisting with some support for medical needs.

Education

Among the refugees there are also many children and teenagers who urgently need education. Many have not been able to go to school for a long time, and now need encouragement to return. One of the churches provided these students with the opportunity to attend preparatory Summer Schools in order to give them the confidence to return to school in September. Barnabas Fund has assisted with funds to support some students with clothes, food, school stationery and books.

Please pray for the estimated 400,000 Iraqi Christians still in Iraq (about one quarter of the Christian population in 1990). Pray that God will protect them and give them strength in these difficult times. Pray especially for the protection of the remaining Christians in Basra, especially women and girls, as British troops pull out this month.

Pray for those who mourn for Osama and Maison, shot dead in Basra, that our heavenly Father will comfort and console them. Pray that Basra Christians will have a faith and confidence in their Lord that will keep them from fear, even at this time.

Pray for all the Christian refugee families in Syria and elsewhere, that the Lord will continue to meet their needs, especially now that it is winter, and move the hearts of their brothers and sisters all over the world to support them and remember them in their prayers.

In April there is due to be a referendum about the constitution of Iraq. Christians are very concerned about the place of Islam in the constitution. Pray that the Lord will guide this vote and bring about peace, equality and justice for all in Iraq.

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