

THE CHRISTIAN POST

Faith Leaders: Stop Religicide of Iraqi Christians

By Katherine T. Phan, Christian Post Reporter
December 21, 2010 | 9:52 am

Religious leaders across different faiths joined together with Open Doors, a ministry that serves persecuted Christians around the world, on Monday to call attention to the systematic “extermination” of Iraqi Christians.

Christians have been in Iraq for over two millennia but now they are on the verge of extinction as extremists continue to target them for their faith. In 2003, the Iraqi Christian population was 1.3 million but that number has dwindled below 350,000 as many flee to neighboring countries to escape the persecution, according to the faith leaders’ estimates.

Dr. Carl Moeller, CEO and president of Open Doors USA, said the crisis of embattled Christians in Iraq and the Middle East is nothing short of “religicide.”

“We must stand with the historic Christian community in these countries, not to give permission for them to be exterminated by our ignorance but to be stood up for,” Moeller told reporters at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles.

“We are asking the world to recognize what's going on as a religicide and the attempt to exterminate Christianity from this part of the world.”

At least 70 to 80 Christians have been killed by Muslim extremists in Iraq over the past two months, according to Open Doors.

The deadliest attack occurred at Our Lady of Salvation Church, a Catholic church in Baghdad, on Oct. 31. At least 58 people, mainly worshippers and priests, were killed.

The latest violent incident involved the kidnapping of a young female student by armed militants. An elderly Christian couple was killed in their home in Baghdad earlier this month and four Christians were gunned down in Mosul, including a 6-year-old girl.

Faith leaders compared the plight of Iraqi Christians to that of Jews who have left the country almost entirely.

Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein, director of Interfaith Affairs at The Simon Weisenthal Center, said the systematic campaign of persecution of Iraqi Christians is “deja-vu” to what happened to the Jews of Iraq.

Moeller concurred, saying there were “disturbing parallels” between what is happening today to Iraqi Christians and what took place in the Jewish community in Iraq from the late 1930s to 1940s.

“Any faith group can be the victim of this sort of hatred if all people remain silent,” said the Christian ministry leader.

Moeller urged for Congress to pass House Resolution 1725, a measure that would publicly condemn the attacks against Christians in Iraq and call on the U.S. government to work together with the Iraqi government to strengthen its security plan for religious minorities.

The resolution, which was introduced by Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.) on Nov. 18, also calls for measures to accelerate the resettlement applications of Iraqi refugees and to improve conditions so they can safely return to Iraq.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on International Justice and Peace has endorsed the measure.

Fr. Alexei Smith, director of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, read a letter sent to President Obama by Cardinal Francis George, the outgoing president of the USCCB.

In the letter, George said that having invaded Iraq, it was the “moral obligation” of the United States to “help Iraq to protect its citizens especially Christians and others who are victims of organized attacks.”

Moeller and Adelerstein said they are calling on the U.S. Congress and the European Union to schedule hearings early next year to address religious freedom issues faced by religious minorities in Iraq.

“This is their hour of desperate need. We need to make sure that our voices are not silent at this moment in history,” said Moeller.

Assyrian Christians will be among those minority groups that will not be free to worship as they choose this Christmas, according to Rosie Malek-Yonan, Assyrian activist and author of *The Crimson Field*, which chronicles events of the Assyrian genocide in Turkey.

“They will be playing a game of Russian roulette,” Malek-Yonan said. “They never know when they leave home to attend church if that is going to be their last mass, if that is going to be the last time they will leave home.”