

Forum on Minority Issues

Sixth session: “Beyond freedom of religion or belief: Guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities”

Intervention

Point 2 of the Programme of Work

- Arabic -

Intervention presented by: Louis Markous Ayoub, Hammurabi Human Rights Organization/Nineveh - Iraq

Madame President, thank you for this opportunity

The situation of Christians in Iraq and the danger of [their] disappearance

Iraq has been going through a difficult phase in the past 10 years with the loss of civic rights and rights of equality immediately after the fall of the dictatorial regime in 2003, which brought on a security breakdown, the spread of chaos and continually increasing violence, extremism and terrorism, which reached all indiscriminately. However, the level of violence and terrorism that emerged had a greater and more serious impact and influence on minorities and Christians, since what they faced [threatened] their existence and risked the disappearance of their physical, civilizational, cultural and human presence, deeply-rooted in history and going back to the ancient civilizations of the Sumerians, Akkadians, Assyrians and Babylonians. They were some of the first people in the region which joined Christianity.

Before delving into the blatant violations of the essential constituents of their existence which Christians face today, we ought to briefly point out that Iraqi Christians were not living in luxury before the change which took place after 2003, rather national policies of assimilation, removal and displacement were carried out against them during the successive regimes that governed Iraq, leading to them becoming a vulnerable minority. They were one of the first groups which faced genocide after the establishment of the new Iraqi state. In Simele in the year 1933, during the royal era, approximately three thousand people fell victim to it, among them women, elders, and children. Then came the massacre of Soriya in the year 1969 in the era of the Ba’ath [party]; the era which witnessed the worst practices towards Christians. Policies

of demographic change and acts of forced assimilation were carried out against them, and more than 200 villages were destroyed, its residents displaced, tens of churches, whose history was traceable to the first century, were demolished and destroyed in North Iraq under security and military pretenses, land was confiscated without compensation and policies of Arabization in villages in the Nineveh plains were applied. The infamous Operation Al-Anfal also removed hundreds of Christians and destroyed more than 120 Christian villages.

After the year 2003, the scene repeated itself by means of terrorism and unrestrained and outlawed armed groups using religion to justify the criminal acts to which hundreds of Christians have fallen victim in different areas of Baghdad, Mosul, Basra and Kirkuk. Their properties were seized, considering them [war] trophies as was mentioned in numerous threatening messages and letters which Christians as well as the rest of the non-muslim minorities received. These practices brought on serious consequences for the future of Christian presence in Iraq especially in areas in the South and Center. Entire neighborhoods in Baghdad have become devoid of Christians, after they left to the North and the neighboring countries, and the number of Christians in Baghdad has decreased to less than 200 thousands after there had been more than half a million Christians [living in the city]. Diyala, Ramadi and Habbaniyah have become devoid of Christians and none but a few remain. Most of those who left Baghdad or the South went to areas in the Nineveh plains, the cities in the Kurdistan region of Iraq and the neighboring countries as a stop in preparation for the emigration abroad.

Further, Christians and Yazidis faced attacks in December 2011 in the Kurdistan region: their stores, hotels, casinos, massage parlors and women's hair salons were burned by Kurdish militants, dashing the hopes of Christians that the region would be a safe haven for them, and the consideration of leaving the country became the presupposed choice for them.

Unfortunately all that Christians faced and are facing - the operations of broad displacement and killing - is recorded and registered against unknown groups and individuals and is attributed to terrorism. Such as what happened in Mosul in the year 2008, Dora in Baghdad and the rest of the regions, and likewise in Basra and the massacre of the Church of Our Lady of Deliverance, except that these major events resemble more operations of genocide. It is not known who is behind it, despite the formation of investigative committees. Their results have remained ambiguous, unknown and were not publicized,

despite the fact that local official organizations have asked the governmental agencies to disclose them, or reveal them to the public.

The number of killed Christians has reached 864 people. Most of them were registered against unknowns. Further, the Hammurabi Organization observed 66 cases of attacks on churches and monasteries until the end of 2012 and registered more than 200 cases of abduction, [though] this number is only 10% of the cases, which Christians faced. It also registered more than 190 cases of different assaults on Christian citizens and estimates that the internally displaced are more than 325 thousand, while the displaced abroad are more than 400 thousand. The flood of displacements continues on a daily basis, while the organization estimates that more than 10 people leave the country every day, so that the number of Christians is confined to less than 500 thousands inhabitants after their count had been approximately 1300 million and 300 thousand in 1997, not including three provinces of the region.

In conclusion, and in light of the loss of the Christians' economic and scientific strength and the essential tools that distinguished them in Iraq, the choice of staying in Iraq becomes a patriotic, Arabic and Islamic choice, because it is tied to the will of the majority and not the will of the minority of Christians. If the majority would want them to stay, the reasoning should be to provide legal and administrative protection and develop plans to achieve it, [however if that would not be the case] the calls that come from the majority for the necessity of Christians to stay, cling to the land and the homeland will remain meaningless.