

Email from Sister Maria, OP

Re: Situation in Iraq

Date: August 23, 2014

Dear all,

We continue to share our daily struggle with you, hoping that our cry will reach the world. We are like the blind man of Jericho (Mark 10: 46-52), who had nothing to express himself, but his voice, asking Jesus for mercy. Although some people ignored his voice, others listened, and helped him. We count on people, who will listen!

We entered the third week of displacement. Things are moving very slowly in terms of providing shelter, food, and necessities for the people. There are still people living in the streets. There are still no organized camps outside of schools that are used as refugee centres. An unfinished, three story building has also been used as a refugee centre. For privacy reasons, families have made rooms using UNHCR plastic sheets in these unfinished buildings. These places look like stables. We all wonder, is there any end in sight? We appreciate all efforts that have been made to provide aid to the displaced people. However, please note, that providing food and shelter is not the only essential thing we need. Our case is much bigger. We are speaking about two minorities (Christian and Yezedians), who lost their land, their homes, their belongings, their jobs, their money, some have been separated from their families and loved ones, and all are persecuted because of their religion.

Our church leaders are doing their best to solve the issue. They have been meeting with political leaders, with the President of Iraq and Kurdistan, but initiatives and actions of these political leaders are really slow and modest. Actually, all political meetings have led to nothing. Until now, there has been no decision made about the current situation of the displaced minorities. For this reason, trust in the political leaders has diminished, if it exists, at all. People cannot tolerate it anymore. It is too heavy of a burden. Yesterday, a young man expressed that he would rather die than live, without dignity. People feel that their dignity has been stripped from them. We are being persecuted because of our religion. None of us ever thought we would live in refugee camps because of that.

It is hard to believe that this is happening in the 21st century. We wonder what is exactly happening. Is it another plan or agreement to subdivide Iraq? If this is true, by whom and why? Why are the events of dividing the Middle East, that happened in 1916, being repeated now? At that time it was a political issue and innocent people paid for it. It is apparent that there are sinfully, cunning people dividing Iraq, now. In 1916, we lost seven of our sisters, many Christians died, and more were scattered. Is it just circumstance we face this division again, or is it deliberate?

However, the struggle is not only in the camps, with the displaced people. What has happened in our Christian towns that have been evacuated is even worse. The IS forced out of their homes those who did not leave their towns up to the night of August 6th. Yesterday, seventy-two people were driven out of Karakosh. However, not all of them arrived; those who arrived last night were in miserable condition. They had to cross Al-Khazi river (a tributary to the Great Zab) on foot because the bridge had been destroyed. There are still quite few on the side of the riverbank. We do not know when they will make it to Erbil. It depends on the situation and negotiations between the Peshmerga and the IS. There are some people who went to fetch the elderly and those unable to walk. One of our sisters went to bring her parents, and told her story. Another woman, said that she was separated from her husband and children, and she knows nothing about them; they are probably among the others who are on the other bank, or they might be among the hostages taken by the IS. Also, a three-year old daughter was taken from her mother's lap, and she also knows nothing about her. We do not know why the IS are sending people out of Karakosh, but we have been hearing from those who just arrived, that IS are bringing barrels into Karakosh and the contents are unknown.

In addition, we know of four Christian families who are stuck in Sinjar for over three weeks; they are probably running out of food and water. If they do not get help, they will die there. At the present, there is no contact with them, and there is no way to negotiate with the IS.

As for our community, we know that our convent in Tel Kaif is being used as an IS headquarter. Also, we know that they had entered our convent in Karakosh. Those that recently arrived have stated that all the holy pictures, icons, and statutes are being destroyed. Crosses have been taken off the top of churches and they have been replaced with the IS flags. That is not only in Karakosh and Tel Kaif. In Baqofa, one of our sisters heard the situation was calm, so she went back with few people, to get her medicine. She found the convent had been searched; everything was open and strewn across the rooms. The minute they entered the convent, three bombs hit the town. They left immediately.

Apart from what is happening to the Christians, yesterday, Friday the 22nd, a Shiite suicide bomber and gunmen attacked Sunni mosque of Abou Mussab in village under Iraqi government control in Diyala province leaving 68 dead. It is heartbreaking to hear about people get killed while praying. In terms of Media and news release, this massacre overshadowed what is happening to the Christians in Nineveh Plain. We are afraid that our struggle will become only our own affair, and it will not have impact on the world anymore.

At last, we have to say that people are losing their patience. They miss everything in their hometowns: churches, church bells, streets, and neighborhood. It is heartbreaking for them to hear that their homes have been robbed. Although they love their towns,

most people are now thinking of leaving the country so they can live in dignity and have a future for their children. It is hard to have hope in Iraq, or to trust the leadership of the country.

Please, keep us in your prayers.

Dominican Sisters of Saint Catherine of Siena-Iraq

P.S. Please share the letter with other people. Let the world hear the cry of the poor and the innocent.

Email from Sister Luma, OP

In an earlier letter [above] it was mentioned that one of our Dominican Sisters (Sr Hanaa) went to fetch her parents from the bank of Al-Khazir River. Receiving a call at 6:00 am on Friday morning the 22nd from her elderly parents, she learned that they were forced out of Karakosh with her blood-sister. A car drove her with her nephew from Ankawa to the last checkpoint leaving Erbil. After that they had to walk for miles to arrive to the river bank; they were lucky that her sister still had a cell phone with her, unlike other people in the caravan. She had to cross two sand ramps that separate Kurdistan from Nineveh Plain. These ramps have been put in the past weeks for protection. Eventually, she found her parents in very bad condition. Her sister was the rod that supported her parents. Upon seeing her parents she learned from her mother that there was a woman and her husband behind on the ground and the man was about to die. There were even three dogs waiting for them to die. Sr. Hanaa gave them some water, and put them in construction carts that they found nearby. They pushed them all the way to Erbil checkpoint where there was a car waiting for them as Sr. Hanaa had called a priest asking for water and help. It took her seven hours to go and bring her family back.

We are enormously proud of our sister, Hanaa, and thank God for her courage. On the next day, when Sr. Hanaa was able to tell her story, it was very sad to see her so overwhelmed because of the horror that she experienced. It was devastating for her that she could not help more people because it was already after 10:00 pm and it was too dark for anyone to go and search for people. She came back hoping that she will be able to go back the next day (Saturday) and help the rest.

On Saturday there was no sign of where the others were. However, people did not give up. A relative of one of those who were lost asked Muslim friends in the area to look for them, but they could not find them until Sunday morning the 24th. When they found them they took them to a house and fed them. They had been without food for two days and they were drinking water from the river while they were lost. The Muslim men who found them were able to connect with the families of these people and guide them

to a village called Jamacor to find people. They arrived to Ankawa- Erbil safe on Sunday at 2:00 pm. They lived two horror nights in the open. Dogs and wolfs were watching them all night and the youngest among them (65 years old a brother of one of our sisters) spent the night collecting stones and throwing them at these animals so they would go away.