

Title: Muslim militants aim to purge Iraq from Christians

Author: Andrew White and Scott Pelley

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Reverend Canon Andrew White of the Anglican Church (photo), affectionately known as The Vicar of Baghdad, says the situation for Christians in Iraq is now much worse than under the Saddam Hussein regime, toppled by US and Coalition forces in 2003, and likely even worst in 2,000 years since the Apostle Thomas brought the

Gospel to that area. He said this in an interview with CBS correspondent Scott Pelley for the news program '60 Minutes'. Iraqi Christians are being hunted, murdered and forced to flee - persecuted on a biblical scale in Iraq's religious civil war.

White invited the CBS television crew to an underground Baghdad church service for what's left of his congregation. White's parishioners are risking their lives to celebrate their faith. "The room is full of children, it's full of women, but I don't see the men. Where are they?" Pelley asked. "They are mainly killed. Some are kidnapped. In the last six months things have got particularly bad for the Christians. Here in this church, all of my leadership were taken and killed," White explained. "All dead. But we never got their bodies back. This is one of the problems. I regularly do funerals here but it's not easy to get the bodies."

"Many Iraqi Christian churches are destroyed or abandoned," Pelley explained. "The congregation is smuggled in and out of this secret sanctuary. Even letting '60 Minutes' come to the service was a terrible risk. White is among the last Christian ministers here." Under Saddam Hussein, Christians were treated much the same as Muslims. There were about a million Christians in Iraq and they were free to worship and build churches. But after the invasion Muslim militants launched a war and White estimates most of Iraq's Christians have fled or been killed. Those still in Baghdad are too old, too ill or too poor to run, and suffering from depravity.

"Outside the church service this gentleman put these pictures in my hand," Pelley said. "I can't show you the pictures. They're just too much. They're pictures of his children. His daughter who was 15 years old. And his son who was about four years old. They've both been shot in the head." There are many stories of shootings, death, torturing, kidnapping, mutilation. The television crew visited one church building that was left suddenly and completely, after a letter went out to the neighborhood a year ago. It reads like this: 'To the Christians. We would like to inform you of the decision of the legal court of the Secret Islamic Army to notify you that this is the last and final threat. If you do not leave your home, your blood will be spilled.' And in case there was any chance that anyone would not get the message, the letter ends like this: 'You and your family will be killed.'

Pelley talked to a young man, a Baghdad Christian, whose name he could not use. He told that after the invasion, posters appeared near his home. "They were like telling us that Christians were against Islam, that we're infidels, that women shouldn't drive and a woman that doesn't wear a scarf would get her head cut off." He told 60 Minutes his family began going to mass in shifts. "If like the church gets bombed on one of the masses, then half of the family will be there and half will be safe." Ultimately, the church was bombed. His family, unharmed, fled to neighboring Jordan. But most Christians ran north to Syria where they've filled a Damascus neighborhood. Knock on any door and you'll find a story.

"They threatened this young girl," one woman told 60 Minutes. "They want her to become a Muslim. The boy is in danger of being kidnapped because we're Christians." Another woman was on a bus outside Baghdad, when gunmen boarded and demanded to know her husband's faith. They told him, 'How come you have not embraced Islam yet?' He said, 'To each his own religion,' she recalled. He was told to get off the bus and they never saw him again.

Christian refugees are now swept up in an exodus of historic proportions. The UN estimates more than four and a half million Iraqis of all faiths are running from the war. Since '60 Minutes' first reported this story in December 2007, the purge of Christians in Iraq has continued. In February, gunmen ambushed, kidnapped and eventually murdered Iraqi Archbishop Paul Faraj Rahho. Canon Andrew White is still ministering to what is left of his congregation.

Sources: Andrew White and Scott Pelley, CBS, ANS (edited by Joel News International)

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