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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[04 June 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

The Republic of Iraq: After flight and expulsion, the Christian population now fears a demographic change

Christian families and children have fled the Republic of Iraq in massive numbers. The Christian population of Iraq has shrunk to only 150,000 members, about 0.39 percent of the country's population. These changing demographics are threatening the future of Christians in Iraq. The future of Iraqi Christian children and next generations is written in the stars as long as they and their families remain displaced, unable to return to their homeland in Iraq.

Christian believers are afraid of new bloodshed in connection with the tensions between Iran and the United States. They fear a proxy war between the two powers on Iraqi soil – particularly in Ninawa/Mossul Province, as many pro-Iranian Shiite militias are operating in the so-called Nineveh Plains. They had fought against the Sunni "Islamic State" (IS). Now, they claim the right to rule the region alone. Along with Iraqi Kurdistan, the Nineveh Plains are the only remaining region in the Republic of Iraq in which the Christian population is in the majority in some areas – trying to preserve its religion, culture, and language.

Before the region was invaded by the so-called "Islamic State" (IS), the Christian population of the towns and villages were a large minority group. As the region was part of the Assyrian Empire in ancient times, Christian groups in the Nineveh Plains wanted to form an autonomous region. There are ongoing controversial discussions about this. Due to the ruthless invasion by IS and the mass exodus of the Christians from this region, initiatives for autonomy are currently off the table. The Christian population is once again exposed to the danger of demographic change. Even though IS was fought back, the original inhabitants of the region cannot return because they lack the funds to rebuild their destroyed homes. Despite many promises by the authorities, reconstruction work is not coming along. However, it would be important for them to return soon, as there is a risk that members of other ethnic groups will take possession of empty buildings and land, driving the former Christian owners out of the region forever. This would be especially tragic for the children.

According to Christian organizations, a total of 13,904 houses in the Nineveh Plains needed to be renovated or rebuilt, and only half of these houses have apparently been completed. In total, 9,060 Christian families are said to have returned to the Nineveh Plains from Iraqi Kurdistan by November 2018. This corresponds to just over 45 percent of the Christian population that had fled from the IS invasion in the summer of 2014. Local Christian groups reported that another 2,000 families would like to return to the Nineveh Plains, but are in desperate need of aid measures and security guarantees. From their viewpoint, the measures are not coming along fast enough, and many see so few prospects for the future and the future of their children that more and more families are considering emigration. Many would leave for Europe immediately if they had the means and the opportunity. Further, the Christian population of Kurdistan, as for example in Ankawa, a suburb of the regional capital Erbil, fears that the unstoppable growth of the city will lead to too much foreign influence. Due to the current development, Ankawa might soon lose its unique historic charm forever.

Another problem is that provisions of Islamic Sharia law are enshrined in the constitution of the Republic of Iraq. Article 2 of the Iraqi Constitution, which was adopted by referendum on October 15, 2005, states that no law may be enacted that contradicts established provisions of Islam. Another aspect of this article of the constitution is guaranteed freedom of religion for all religious minorities. At the same time, however, Islam is declared the "state religion". This discrepancy is an almost unsolvable legal problem, which Christians, but also Yezidis, Mandaeans and others other non-Muslim groups, as well as women and girls in Iraq have to struggle with.

The people of the Republic of Iraq had been waiting for the establishment of an effective government for their country for almost six months. At the end of April 2020 – following numerous public demonstrations (some of which were violently suppressed) and the forced resignation of the then Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi – the parliament confirmed a successor government. Cardinal Louis Sako, the Chaldean Patriarch of Babylon, paid tribute to the new Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi and expressed his hopes that the new leader would put himself at the service of all the people of the country. The most important representative of the Christian population of Iraq is hoping that the interests of all citizens and all ethnic groups, including the Christian communities, will be respected.

Society for Threatened Peoples therefore calls upon the UN Human Rights Council to urge the Government of the Republic of Iraq to:

- allow Christian children to have a future in Iraq in safety, in re-built communities and with access to schools,
- end systematic disadvantage for people of the Christian faith, especially girls and women; property disputes between the Christian and Muslim populations must be resolved peacefully and fairly,

- prevent concessions to radical Sunni or Shiite groups in the reform process regarding specific laws or the constitution,
 - ensure equal status of Christian and other minorities before the courts,
 - involve the Christian group of the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Arameans as well as other minorities in the consensus-building and decision-making processes for the future of their country.
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