

Dominican sister vows to remain in Iraq

Carmen Blanco Catholic News Service | Jun. 25, 2009

WASHINGTON -- Despite growing numbers of Iraqi Christians fleeing their country to escape the violence and persecution, an Iraqi Dominican nun says she will remain in her country.

"I am committed to staying in Iraq for those who remain: the poor, the vulnerable, the widows and their children," Sister Maria Hanna said in a meeting at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Hanna, a member of the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena in Mosul, Iraq, visited Washington in June to talk about her work and to give Catholic agencies and organizations an update on current conditions in the country. She has set goals to build schools and hospitals for those remaining in Iraq and to give hope to all Iraqis.

"Our services are not just for Christians," Hanna said. "Our hospital offers care to Christians and Muslims. And the students in our schools are mostly Muslims."

In 1992, the sisters opened the Al-Hayat maternity hospital, which offers a 24-hour emergency clinic. They hope to add a surgical hospital and a general hospital in northern Iraq, she said.

For Hanna, messages of peace and solidarity are communicated to Iraqis through schools and hospitals that provide patients from all religious and ethnic groups with spiritual, emotional and physical healing.

"Reconciliation is an important part of health care," she said.

The nuns also hope to build a new church that will serve the 40,000-45,000 people from the city of Karakosh and its surrounding villages, she said. The intent is that it will serve other faith and minority ethnic groups.

The sisters hope to join forces with other religious orders to inform the public about conflict resolution.

"We want Iraqis to come, meet and reconcile," Hanna told Catholic News Service.

Christians have been the target of kidnappings and violent attacks that have escalated since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Since then, the sisters have had to evacuate two of their living spaces. One in particular was the target of several attacks, prompting some of the nuns to move to safer locations.

"We are more concerned about the mission than the convents," Hanna said.

This year, the Dominican Sisters renovated and opened a private secondary school for girls in Baghdad. The school, founded in the 1960s, was appropriated by the government in the 1970s and given back in 2007.

"Opening this school poses a threat to our safety," she said, referring to the area's dangerous and unstable conditions, "but it is a sign of hope for women and neighboring families."

Hanna expressed deep concern for the well-being of the children. Currently, Iraq has only two orphanages for its growing number of orphans.

For children who know far too much of war and civil unrest, the sisters hope to begin the first Montessori school in Iraq. Dominican Sister Amman, a translator for Hanna, told CNS that the Montessori method appealed to them because of the ways it nurtures the mind, body and spirit of the child.

"We need your prayers," Hanna said. "And we would like your support for our mission."

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