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Auxiliary bishop consecrated for Baghdad

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Bishop Andreas Abouna was consecrated an auxiliary of Baghdad in Rome on January 6, 2003, and shortly afterwards we sat down for an interview in which he voiced concern about the possibility of a Christian exodus from Iraq in the wake of a then-hypothetical U.S.-led invasion.

Today, Abouna says, his worst fears have been realized.

"The constitution and the political developments of the past 18 months or so have not helped at all. It is just a theory," he told the German agency Aid to the Church in Need this week. "Everyone is asking: when will the violence stop? They want to rest. They cannot live like this -- everyday there are these terrible things."

As a result, Abouna said, the Christian population of Iraq has been cut in half over the last three years, from an estimated 1.3 million to 600,000. In Baghdad, he said, historically home to a disproportionately high number of Christian residents, up to 75 percent have left -- some to safer zones in the north of the country, some abandoning Iraq altogether.

"When so many are leaving from a small community like ours, you know that it is dangerous -- dangerous for the future of the Church in Iraq," Abouna said.

Iraqi Christians who took refuge in Syria, Jordan and Turkey and have attempted to return, Abouna said, are generally disheartened by what they've found.

Abouna indicated that Christians in Iraq are not necessarily being targeted more than other groups, but given that they were already a small community facing an uncertain future, instability and difficult living conditions have added to the demoralization.

Sadly, Abouna said, many of the Christians who remain are simply too poor or too weak to leave.

"What we are hearing now is the alarm bell for Christianity in Iraq," Abouna said.

*The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is **jallen@ncronline.org***

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