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'Shadow war' targets Christians in Syria

by John L. Allen Jr.

Christian minorities face threats in many parts of the convulsed Middle East today, but perhaps nowhere is the danger more acute than in Syria amid that nation's bloody civil war.

An Internet video that went viral in late June, purportedly showing the beheading of three Christian clergymen by Syrian militants, was initially believed to capture the death of a Catholic priest named Fr. François Murad.

It turned out to be older footage of uncertain provenance, but that didn't make Murad any less dead. According to officials of the Franciscan order that had given him refuge, Murad actually was shot to death on June 23 in the town of Gassanieh, in a convent where the 49-year-old monk was in hiding.

Reports suggest members of Jabhat al-Nusra, a militant Islamic group that's part of Syria's rebel alliance, killed Murad.

The killing represents the latest shock for Syria's Christian community, which has become one of the primary victims of the violent standoff between rebel forces and the Assad regime.

Christians have long been an important minority in Syria, composing roughly 10 percent of the population of 22.5 million. The majority is Greek Orthodox, followed by Catholics, the Assyrian Church of the East, and various kinds of Protestants.

Syria was until recently a destination of choice for Christians fleeing the violence in Iraq, but all that changed with the eruption of civil war in 2011.

The kidnapping of two prominent Orthodox bishops in April underscored the new dangers. A group of armed men took the Syriac Orthodox bishop of Aleppo, Youhanna Ibrahim, and the Greek Orthodox

metropolitan of Aleppo and Iskenderun, Boulos al-Yaziji, on the road to Aleppo. Their driver, a Syrian Orthodox deacon, was shot to death.

To date, the whereabouts of the bishops remain unknown.

Kidnapping Christians reportedly has become a growth industry. In late February, the website Ora pro Siria, operated by Italian missionaries in Syria, launched an emergency fundraising appeal called "Ransom a Christian." The website said the going price for a kidnapped priest was in the neighborhood of \$200,000.

It's not just clergy who find themselves in harm's way. In June, the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land reported that a cluster of Christian villages along Syria's Orontes River had been almost totally destroyed in the fighting, forcing thousands into hiding.

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"Of the 4,000 inhabitants of the village of Ghassanieh, as just one example, the local pastor reports that no more than 10 people remain," said Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, director of the custody, adding that bombs had also seriously damaged a Franciscan mon-astery in Knayeh near the border with Lebanon.

As *NCR* went to press, a Greek-Catholic monastery in Qara was under assault by rebel forces. Officials of the Norbertine order told Vatican Radio they had lost contact with a 74-year-old Belgian missionary, Daniel Maes, living at the monastery.

In a July 1 opinion piece on National Review Online, religious freedom activist Nina Shea charged that a "shadow war" is being waged against Syria's Christians. Shea pointed to the death of Murad and the fact that Islamist groups have begun setting up Shariah courts in areas of Syria under their control, charging Christians with a variety of alleged offenses under Muslim law.

In that context, some Syrian Christians have issued warnings about Western policies of arming Syria's opposition.

"I would like everyone to know that the West, in supporting the revolutionaries, is supporting religious extremists and helping to kill Christians," Fr. Halim Noujaim, the Franciscans' regional minister for Syria and Lebanon, said after the execution of Murad.

The Obama administration recently announced the U.S. will provide small arms and ammunition to the rebels. Critics such as Noujaim charge that Assad's fall could pave the way for either Iraq-style chaos or the Egyptian-style rise of an Islamist regime, in either case setting up Syria's Christian minority for special hardship.

The Catholic Near East Welfare Association has issued an emergency appeal to support Syria's Christians.

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