

Armenia's Yezidis Reach Out to Iraqi Kin

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Some argue that Armenians have a special responsibility to help given their own tragic history.

Members of Armenia's 50,000-strong Yezidi community are urging their government to do more to help their fellow-believers who are threatened by Islamic insurgents in Iraq.

Some 400,000 Yezidis have fled their homes, either finding shelter in Turkey or Syria, or seeking a safe place inside Iraq. The plight of thousands of people in the Sinjar Mountains attracted world attention and prompted Western airdrops of food and water.

News of their plight has sparked action among Armenia's Yezidis.

"We talk to our brothers every day. Today we heard that the Islamists issued an ultimatum to three Yezidi villages and gave them three days to renounce their faith. The residents of two of the villages managed to flee, but 80 men were killed in the third village, and the women and girls were taken to the town of Tal Afar and sold into slavery," said Mamet Amiryan, deputy head of Armenia's National Union of Yezidis.

The world's two million Yezidis, who speak a Kurdish language, are spread throughout the Middle East. Their unique religion has pre-Islamic roots and is connected to the ancient Zoroastrian faith. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – or the Islamic State as it now styles itself – is intolerant of anything outside its own fundamentalist Sunni views and has given the Yezidis a stark choice – convert or die.

"The Iraqi government has even published reports that the Islamist extremists buried 500 women and children alive and beheaded our priests," Boris Murazi, head of a Yezidi organisation called Minjar, told IWPR.

A spokesman for President Serzh Sargsyan said on August 18 that Armenia was deeply concerned by the reports of bloodshed.

"The president has ordered the foreign ministry and the heads of the country's diplomatic missions to redouble efforts to raise this question at international level," the spokesman said.

He said the government in Yerevan would consider sending humanitarian aid to the refugees.

Murazi said that after meeting Yezidi community members, Deputy Prime Minister Armen Gevorgyan promised that 50,000 US dollars would be spent on humanitarian aid.

"But he said we had to send it to Iraq ourselves," Murazi said. "We suggested giving the money to the United Nations, which is organising aid distribution."

Foreign Ministry spokesman Tigran Balayan said talks were ongoing about how to get funds to the intended beneficiaries.

Murazi and others are comparing events in Iraq to the mass killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915.

"All this will be like the Armenian genocide if no one does anything and the expulsion of the Yezidis continues," he said. "The Armenians managed to save one small corner of their homeland – modern-day Armenia – but we won't manage even that."

Ruben Melkonyan, deputy head of the department of Oriental studies at Yerevan State University, said Armenians needed to reach out and help the Yezidis.

"If the genocide of the Armenians had been condemned, then there wouldn't have been new ones," he said. "Until that happens, we will continue to witness new genocides."

Murazi said many of the displaced Yezidis would welcome a chance to move to Armenia, just as many Christian Armenians from Syria have done. But he said the government was blocking this because there is no fast-track visa arrangement in place with Iraq.

"There are 15 empty houses in our villages, and we could put them there," said Alik Namoyan, head of the the Yezidi village of Mirak. "We are ready to offer them assistance and give them everything they need – provisions, bedding and livestock. What else could we do? Our brothers are in trouble."

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