



**Press Release**  
December 12, 2009

**Christian Leaders Convene in Baghdad to Determine Their Future in Iraq**  
Conference Co-Sponsored by Hammurabi Human Rights Organization (HHRO) &  
Christian Solidarity International (CSI)

*(Baghdad, Washington, December 12, 2009)* “Do Christians have a Future in Iraq?” Over 100 Iraqi Christian leaders convened yesterday in Baghdad to address the possible extinction of their ancient community at Iraq’s 1<sup>st</sup> Christian Leadership Conference on Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

Since the downfall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, nearly half of Iraq’s one million Christians have fled for refuge abroad, while many of the remnants live as destitute IDPs. 518 Christians have been killed as a result of politically-inspired violence during the past six years, while 48 churches have been destroyed, according to a report submitted by the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization (HHRO) – a co-sponsor of the Conference.

In her keynote speech, Annette Walder, International President of Christian Solidarity International (CSI) warned that the survival of both the Iraqi state and the Christian community are inextricably linked. She furthermore urged Christian leaders throughout the world to break their “eerie silence” surrounding this crisis of survival.

William Warda, President of the HHRO, stressed that Iraq’s ancient Christian community, together with the indigenous Yezidi and Mandaean minorities, constitute the deepest roots of the Iraqi nation. If Iraq’s Christian roots are severed, he continued, the Iraqi nation and state will shrivel and die.

Habib Ephrem, President of the Syriac League in Lebanon, urged Western powers to help secure the survival of Christians in Iraq by refraining from the pursuit of economic and strategic interests without due regard for principles of democracy and human rights.

In a written message, Dr. Adel Abdul-Mahdi, Vice-President of Iraq and patron of the Christian Leadership Conference, declared that “those who kill Christians and bomb churches are enemies of Iraq”, and pledged that the Iraqi state will “facilitate the return of refugees and provide generous assistance to those who have lost their homes, their jobs and their loved ones.”

Mark Storella, the U.S. Embassy’s Senior Coordinator for Refugee and IDP Affairs, reported that the U.S. government had spent \$387 million for Iraqi refugees and IDPs in 2009, and cited President Barack Obama’s February 2009 Iraq pledge to “provide more assistance and take steps to increase international support for countries already hosting refugees”.

Christian refugees and IDPs provided testimony of the violent persecution - including death threats and the murder of loved ones - that forced them to flee their homes. They also highlighted the failure of the Iraqi Government and its international partners to provide the assistance they required for a safe, dignified and sustainable return to their homes. Returning female refugees reported having to wear the Islamic *hijab* for security on the streets in some Iraqi cities.

The Iraqi Christian Leadership Conference will close today with the presentation of policy recommendations to the Iraqi and American governments, and to the rest of the international community.

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