

PRESS RELEASE FROM JUBILEE CAMPAIGN

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LORDS DEBATE PLIGHT OF IRAQ'S CHRISTIANS

The desperate plight of Christians in Iraq was discussed in a debate in the House of Lords on the evening of Wednesday July 6. At the request of the human rights organisation, the Jubilee Campaign, Catholic Crossbench Peer, Lord Hylton, secured a debate asking the British government what they were doing to protect the interests of the ChaldoAssyrians and other religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq. Jubilee Campaign also helped to brief most of the participants in the debate.

More than 95% of Iraq's Christians are ChaldoAssyrians. The ChaldoAssyrians are the descendants of the ancient Assyrians who in Old Testament times controlled the largest empire in the Middle East. The heartland of the ancient Assyrian empire was in what is today northern Iraq and northern Iraq continues to be the heartland of the ChaldoAssyrians. With attacks from Islamic militants and by neighbouring Kurds, kidnappings and the bombing of churches, tens of thousands of ChaldoAssyrians have fled Iraq and this ancient Christian community is at risk of being reduced to a tiny remnant or disappearing altogether.

Lord Hylton told the House, "The ChaldoAssyrians have suffered severely throughout the 20th century. It is little known that many thousands died during the genocidal massacres of Armenians in 1915-16. The army of newly independent Iraq, in 1933, bombarded ChaldoAssyrian towns and villages, killing some 4,000 people, mainly women, children and the elderly. Saddam Hussein ordered the destruction of 200 of their villages, including historic churches and monasteries..... Concerted bomb attacks were made on some 15 Christian churches, and at least two schools, between June and December of last year. Christian bishops in Mosul and Amadyah have experienced threats of violence, as have students at Mosul University and individual Christian schools.....it is hardly surprising that some 40,000 or more ChaldoAssyrians have fled into Syria and Jordan."

Lord Hylton asked the British Government what their response was to the three requests made by Iraq's leading Christian political party, the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM). The ADM asked for an autonomous administrative region in the plains of Nineveh and in Dohuk province or, at minimum, a separate governorate, which would include some other minorities such as the Yezidi and Shabak. The second request was for the return of ChaldoAssyrian land and villages misappropriated by Kurds and Arabs. The third request was for a fair share of funds, both external and Iraqi, earmarked for reconstruction. Lord Hylton pointed out that such funds have either not been paid to the ChaldoAssyrians or have been diverted to the benefit of the Kurdish regional government.

Labour Peer, Lord Rea, spoke in support of Iraq's ChaldoAssyrians, saying, "Since the first Gulf War they have been oppressed both by the Kurds of north Iraq and by fundamentalist Islamists in the south. That has escalated since the second Gulf War.....There has been relentless pressure by Kurds on Assyrians in the Nineveh plains near

Mosul - their traditional homeland - to move out.....It seems that the Kurds, themselves victims of oppression, are now oppressing the indigenous minority in their midst.....As an example of what is happening I want to quote from a Jubilee Campaign paper, published on 3 February. It says: 'KDP deprives Iraqi Christians of right to vote. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).....has prevented voting by ChaldoAssyrian Christians of the Nineveh Plains during elections for the Iraqi National Assembly on January 30. The KDP effectively blocked the delivery of ballot boxes to at least six major ChaldoAssyrian towns and villages in the Nineveh Plains around Mosul.....The resulting unavailability of ballot boxes prevented up to 100,000 ChaldoAssyrian voters from casting their votes and affected tens of thousands of Yezidi, Shabak and Turkmen voters.' "

Lord Rea said that the ChaldoAssyrians had backed the Allies during the First World War and helped the UK greatly during the protectorate period in Iraq in the 1920s. In return the British Government promised them an autonomous homeland but it never materialised. He emphasised that a special historical debt of gratitude is owed by the UK to these people.

The Anglican Lord Bishop of Rochester, Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali, said that the ChaldoAssyrians have been subjected to almost unparalleled brutality, not least in our own times - but not only in our own times. He said, "The story of oppression has continued to this day. They are now threatened by the Islamist insurgents with forced conversion, kidnapping, assassination and the destruction of their property. The Kurds, however, also regard them, as has been said, as a thorn in the side of a greater Kurdistan. Once again, their land has been expropriated, their villages occupied and their very survival as a community threatened....."

Her Majesty's Government must make sure that a future Iraqi constitution not only recognises the existence of different communities in the country but also provides for full freedom of belief, expression and worship. If that does not happen, the sacrifice of thousands of Iraqi lives and the lives of our own soldiers will have been in vain."

Baroness Royall of Blaisdon responded on behalf of the Government. She said that the Government wants to see an inclusive constitutional process in which the final product enshrines the rights of all Iraqis, protecting their interests. Regarding the voting irregularities which prevented thousands of ChaldoAssyrians voting at the last elections, she said the Independent Electoral Commission has conducted a major lessons-learnt exercise with the UN to ensure that in future elections there will be fewer irregularities.

Concerning funds for ChaldoAssyrian reconstruction, Baroness Royall claimed it was up to the Iraqi Government to co-ordinate with the Kurdish regional government to afford an equitable redistribution of resources to all the Iraqi people for construction. She said it would be premature to judge what the contents of the Iraqi constitution will be, but welcomed the decision on July 4 to expand the constitutional committee to a commission that includes the broadest possible participation. She said that the Transitional Administrative Law guarantees the full religious rights of all individuals to freedom of religious belief and practices. The British Government hoped that the

constitutional drafters would respect that principle but it was for the Iraqis themselves to decide their constitution.

Baroness Royall said it was the British Government's view that Article 53(D) of Iraq's Transitional Administrative Law, does not include the right to an autonomous administrative region for one particular group. Article 53(D) guarantees, "the administrative, cultural, and political rights of the Turcomans, ChaldoAssyrians and all other citizens."

John Michael, the leading UK representative of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, says, " We anxiously await an official response to the letter sent by Mr. Yonadam Kanna to Prime Minister Tony Blair, dated 20th May 2005. Mr. Yonadam Kanna is the Secretary General of the Assyrian Democratic Movement and the only Assyrian democratically elected by ChaldoAssyrians in the Iraqi National Assembly. The contents of the letter are unequivocal and clearly confirm the official position of the Assyrian Democratic Movement with regards to the need for an autonomous administrative region for the ChaldoAssyrians in the Nineveh Plains. The letter from Mr. Kanna also confirmed that the Assyrian Democratic Movement is actively pursuing the return of all ChaldoAssyrian land and villages that have suffered from encroachment and illegal misappropriation as well as the reconstruction of our towns and villages destroyed by the previous regime."

Jubilee Campaign's Researcher and Parliamentary Officer, Wilfred Wong, says, "The British Government has a responsibility to do much more to help the ChaldoAssyrians and they ought to push hard for the ChaldoAssyrians to have an autonomous administrative region, instead of spinning a myth that only a small minority of ChaldoAssyrians want this. Mr. Kanna ran in the Iraqi elections on the platform of regional autonomy for the ChaldoAssyrians and won strong support from the ChaldoAssyrian voters to get into Parliament. This is a clear message from the ChaldoAssyrian people that they want their own administrative region. Article 53 (D) guarantees the administrative rights of the ChaldoAssyrians and all other citizens. This must mean that the ChaldoAssyrians have the right to administer their own region, so it is difficult to see why the British Government claims that Article 53(D) does not include the right to an autonomous administrative region for one particular group. The British Government also ought to take a much more active stance in assisting the ChaldoAssyrians in getting their misappropriated land and property returned and in receiving a fair share of the funds for reconstruction."

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Jubilee Campaign is an interdenominational Christian human rights organisation which has worked with over 100 British Parliamentarians on human rights issues worldwide.