

Lords Hansard text for 6 July 2005

Iraq: Minorities

7.45 pm

Lord Hylton rose to ask Her Majesty's Government, what steps they will take to protect the legitimate interests of the Chaldo-Assyrians and other religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq.

The noble Lord said: My Lords, I thank noble Lords who will take part in this short debate. I shall concentrate on the Chaldo-Assyrians, leaving other speakers to raise issues about the larger and smaller minorities. In asking this Question, I do not wish to repeat what was said in another place on this subject, on 8 December 2004. I do, however, need to put the Chaldo-Assyrians into their historic and geographic context.

Some 800,000 members of this minority have lived in Iraq since early Old Testament times. They are a three-fold minority—ethnic, religious, and cultural. They are a distinct ethnic group, different from their Arab, Kurdish and Turcoman neighbours. They speak Syriac, a form of the Aramaic language that they used when they became Christians in the first and second centuries. Religiously, many of them are in communion with the Roman Catholic Church. They make up some 95 per cent or so of all Iraqi Christians. The Chaldo-Assyrians 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 Chaldo-Assyrian 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. In 1984, three leaders of the Assyrian Democratic Movement were hanged.

I should state that I have been a strong friend and supporter of the Kurdish people, ever since Saddam Hussein's gas attack on Hallabjah in 1987 and the

subsequent Anfal ethnic clearance. It is impossible, however, to defend the behaviour of the Kurdish authorities, and the Kurdish Democratic Party in particular, towards the Chaldo-Assyrians after the end of the first Gulf war. Amnesty International reported on that in June 1994. At least five named people are known to have been murdered, before and after that date. Others were assaulted or kidnapped, sometimes

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for the purpose of forced marriage and conversion to Islam. It seems that no one has ever been brought to justice for those crimes.

I have with me, and have provided to the Foreign Office, details of 58 confiscations and encroachments on Chaldo-Assyrian land and property in the provinces of Dohuk and Nineveh. Nearly all of these happened since 1991, usually with the approval or connivance of the Kurdish authorities. No redress or compensation has been offered. More worrying are the attacks that the Chaldo-Assyrian community has suffered, after the fall of the Ba'athist tyranny. Over 100 deaths, some followed by decapitation, have been recorded since then, and probably still more woundings and injuries. I have details with me, for the period from April 2003 to November 2004.

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 Amadiyah have experienced threats of violence, as have students at Mosul University and individual Christian schools. The headquarters of the Assyrian Democratic Movement were attacked by mortars in August 2004.

I emphasise that these are not just my facts and figures; they are confirmed by independent sources in Iraq, Britain and the United States. Given the black record of murder and mayhem, it is hardly surprising that some 40,000 or more Chaldo-Assyrians have fled into Syria and Jordan. From there it is likely that many have already moved on to America or Australia. It is vitally important that as many as possible should be enabled to return. I shall say more on that later. Meanwhile, one can easily understand the fears that the

Chaldo-Assyrians face regarding complete extinction as a community. They live among old Ba'athist enemies, unsympathetic neighbours, and militant Islamists, whether indigenous or infiltrating from the world outside. Most of those neighbours are heavily armed.

Therefore, I ask the Government what their response is to the three requests made by the Assyrian Democratic Movement on behalf of its people. It asked for an autonomous administrative region in the plans of Nineveh and in Dohuk province or, at minimum, a separate governorate, which would include some Yezidi and Shabak; that is, other minorities living close by. Such separate or autonomous arrangements would assure the survival of the Chaldo-Assyrians' unique language and culture in their historic homeland. The request was based on Article 53(D) of the transitional administrative law, which stated very clearly,

"This law shall guarantee the administrative, cultural and political rights of the Turcomans, Chaldo-Assyrians and all other citizens".

Your Lordships will note that the Turkomen have powerful protectors of their interests, who share a common frontier. The Chaldo-Assyrians, who were specifically mentioned, deserve the protection of the allied powers and of the United Nations. At the very least they should be able to have primary schools with teaching in their own language.

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The second request was for the return of land and villages, illegally misappropriated or suffering wrongful encroachment. The third request was for a fair and reasonable share of funds, both external and Iraqi, ear-marked for reconstruction. Such funds have either not been paid to the Chaldo-Assyrian or have been diverted to the benefit of the Kurdish regional government. I suggest that these three requests are not unreasonable. It seems to me that they are legitimate interests, as suggested in the text of my Question. They should do much to encourage the return of Christian *émigrés* and exiles, who could form one of the best educated, professional and politically moderate elements in the whole of Iraq.

I must ask Her Majesty's Government whether they have studied the final declaration of the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian General Conference of October 2003, held in Baghdad. How have they replied to the letter sent to our Prime Minister, dated 20 May 2005, from Mr Yonadam Kanna, Secretary-General of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, who is also a member of the Iraqi National Assembly? That letter set out the three requests already mentioned. It is worth noting that Mr Kanna is the only independent Chaldo-Assyrian in the Iraqi Constituent Assembly and he stood on a platform of regional autonomy. If we take together the two documents just mentioned, it is clear that the request for autonomy comes from the people themselves. It was irresponsible of a Foreign Office Minister to suggest otherwise, when speaking last year.

I conclude by urging the Government to use their utmost efforts to ensure that freedoms of thought, conscience and religion are enshrined in the future constitution of Iraq. These are the bare, necessary essentials for a very plural society and would give expression to Iraq's obligations under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Lord Rea: My Lords, I am very pleased that the noble Lord, Lord Hylton, has asked this Question as I too have become aware of the dangerous situation facing the Iraqi Assyrians. He has described their ancient lineage and some of their long and often tragic history. They backed the allies during the First World War and helped the UK greatly during the protectorate period in Iraq in the 1920s which made them very unpopular with some Iraqis and Kurds. In return we promised them an autonomous homeland when we left, but it never materialised.

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, as the noble Lord pointed out. I also have the list of atrocities committed against the Assyrians that he described to us.

There has been relentless pressure by Kurds on Assyrians in the Nineveh plains near Mosul—their traditional homeland—to move out. A block has been imposed on Assyrians returning to their homes and land from which they were evicted by Saddam. Crimes

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against Assyrian people in KDP-controlled northern Iraq have not been investigated. There appears to be a climate of impunity. It seems that the Kurds, themselves victims of oppression, are now oppressing the indigenous minority in their midst. Unfortunately that appears to be a common human trait, both within families and with tribes and nations.

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 Chaldo Assyrian 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 Chaldo Assyrian towns and villages in the Nineveh Plains around Mosul. . . . The resulting unavailability of ballot boxes prevented up to 100,000 Chaldo Assyrian voters from casting their votes and affected tens of thousands of Yesidis, Shabak, and Turkman voters".

I suggest that there are two main ways in which the UK could honour its historical debt to the Assyrian people: first, through helping to ensure that the new draft Iraqi constitution, due to be agreed in about five weeks, contains specific provisions that ensure that the Assyrians are recognised as a national minority with a right to representation and the right to live peacefully in the land of their ancestors. That should include the right to return to their land and homes from which they have been illegally evicted. I understand that on this very day the European Parliament is requesting its representative in Iraq to

make just such a recommendation. Perhaps my noble friend can outline the role that the UK would play during its presidency of the EU to back up that request.

The second way is through our contacts in Iraq with the United States, the senior coalition partner, responsible for the Kurdish areas of Iraq, asking them to put pressure on the Kurds, especially the KDP, to respect the rights of indigenous minorities to the peaceful occupation of their rightful land and property.

Many Assyrians feel that they are so vulnerable in the present state of Iraq, that they should be granted a semi-autonomous region, as described by the noble Lord, in the Nineveh plains, where they can administer the law and provide education in their own Syriac language. That is near to what we offered them in the 1920s but did not grant before we left Iraq.

It would be wrong to pretend that Assyrians are the only people in Iraq who are suffering; far from it, as anyone who pays attention to the media knows. There is, however, a case to be made that we owe the Assyrians a special historical debt of gratitude and that there are some possible lines of action, as the noble Lord, Lord Hylton, and I have indicated.

As a footnote, I would like to point out that it is of importance to some Assyrians that the term "Chaldo-Assyrian" may be confusing since it implies that it only includes the Chaldean-Assyrians, who are Catholics. Using the single word "Assyrian" in any official document would be more clearly inclusive of both the Catholic and Orthodox branches of Assyrian Christianity.

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8 pm

The Lord Bishop of Rochester: My Lords, I also am very glad that the noble Lord, Lord Hylton, has obtained time for this debate; it is not just timely but

urgent. Indigenous Christian and other communities have been so often betrayed by the powers playing the "great game" in the Middle East and south-west Asia. We must make sure that the Chaldean-Assyrian and, indeed, other communities are not sold for 30 pieces of silver yet again. On the one hand, these communities have enjoyed a high level of autonomy as so-called "millets" under the Ottoman Empire and, indeed, before then. They are used to ordering their own affairs, having their own religious, political, legal and social leaders and contributing to the prosperity of their country as a whole.

On the other hand, as the noble Lords, Lord Hylton, and Lord Rea, pointed out, along with the Armenians, they have been subjected to almost unparalleled brutality, not least in our own times—but not only in our own times. The figures speak for themselves. During the genocide which followed the beginning of the First World War, 750,000 were killed and their lands confiscated, mainly because they supported the Allies against the central powers. In the 1930s again, the Assyrians were targeted by the Iraqi Army and the Baathists refused even to recognise them as a legitimate religious, ethnic and linguistic minority. The teaching of their language, Syriac, which is of course a form of the language spoken by Jesus himself, suffered grievously at that time.

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.

Christians in Iraq number only about 3 or 4 per cent. Other non-Muslim communities, some of which have been mentioned already this evening, add up to very little more. It is very easy, therefore, to overlook, ignore or neglect such minorities when nations and politicians are playing with numbers—and yet the safety and security of non-Muslim communities is hugely important to the goal of a tolerant and democratic Iraq.

It is not encouraging, therefore, to hear that they have been forcibly prevented from exercising their franchise and from participation in the emerging democratic process, even while coalition forces have been present in Iraq. What will happen when they leave? The Kurds must be made to see that what they have aspired for themselves is also legitimate for other communities in Iraq. The smaller communities cannot simply be sacrificed on the altars of self-interest of the bigger ones.

I have said before in this House that the future of Iraq cannot be unitary. Its legacy—and those of other territories with an Ottoman past—points to a

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federalist structure in which the identity, autonomy and even territory of each community will be recognised. Happily, the Transitional Administrative Law (or TAL) seems to hint at this and specifically guarantees the "administrative, cultural and political rights" of the Chaldean-Assyrian and other communities. Such an aspiration must, however, be given practical form. It is true that since the Nahda, or the Arab renaissance, Christians in Arab lands have contributed, out of all proportion to their number, to the emergence of a national identity, and not only in Iraq of course. Such a contribution must be acknowledged and allowed to continue.

The security situation is such, and the history is so bad, however, that these communities will only have the confidence to contribute more widely if they have some sort of safe havens of their own. The recent call of the Chaldean-Assyrian-Syriac Conference in Baghdad for an administrative region on the Nineveh plains is an attempt to articulate such a need. It should be noted that even now, the communities are not demanding an exclusively Christian enclave but one which can be shared with others. Such an arrangement would be in keeping with history and with the present security needs of these communities.

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. As they say in Arabic *Na'ud billah*—we seek refuge in God, may it not happen!

In spite of huge difficulties, the Christian communities of Iraq have been described by Canon Andrew White as full of faith and hope. They are experiencing significant renewal in their lives together. This must be allowed to continue, indeed, to flourish and not be snuffed out by religious or ethnic extremism

Baroness Cox: My Lords, we all owe a debt of gratitude to my noble friend Lord Hylton for securing this debate on a subject which has been seriously neglected.

For various minority groups, including the Christians of various traditions, the situation is extremely grave and I will be echoing and endorsing all those concerns expressed by previous speakers. As has been said, there has been a Christian presence in Iraq since the first century. The country's Christians now comprise about 3 per cent of the Iraqi population, about 85 per cent of whom belong to the Assyrian tradition. They face severe pressures and are under such threat that their very survival is at risk. They face danger daily. Many have already been killed, kidnapped or subjected to such intimidation that they have fled the country to exile in Jordan, Syria or further afield.

The first co-ordinated attacks against churches occurred in August 2004. Further attacks have followed. Many of the attacks involve physical

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violence in which Christians have been killed and others intimidated, for example, with letters warning, "You are not wanted here".

Christians have been targeted for various reasons, and partly because they suffer a double stigma. On the one hand, they were seen as favoured protégés of Saddam, who needed their knowledge and skills. On the other,

they are now seen as guilty of association with the coalition forces and thus defined by militant Muslims as "modern-day crusaders". Also many Iraqi Christians were educated at Christian schools, where they learnt languages needed for work as translators for the coalition forces.

These characteristics legitimise, for some, the killing of Christians and attacks on Christian property. Christians are also vulnerable because they do not belong to large tribes and have relatively little familial protection.

Widespread kidnapping is another major problem. Christians are particularly vulnerable here because of their faith and also because they are deemed to be sufficiently wealthy to pay the ransom and to have access to western sources for funds for paying for their freedom. In some cases, a victim was killed if his family had difficulty raising the necessary money. Therefore some Church leaders are afraid to travel to visit their communities for fear of kidnapping.

Another very serious problem confronts the Christian community: the fear that the proposed constitution will not allow freedom of worship. Despite assurances by the Transitional National Assembly that the rights of minorities will be protected, proposals to combine Sharia with the so-called "best of the west" in democracy and protection of the rights of minorities are untenable. By its nature, Islamic Sharia law violates fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—such as the principle of equality before the law and freedom to choose and change religion.

As it has been applied over the centuries, Sharia does not allow equality before the law between men and women or between Muslims and non-Muslims. Moreover, while Sharia allows freedom to choose to become a Muslim, that is a one-way street. The decision to convert from Islam is apostasy, punishable by death—dictated by Sharia court, the family or local community. Therefore, Sharia law would have further devastating effects on the rights and freedoms of Christian and other non-Muslim communities in

Iraq. One needs only to consider the situation in places such as northern Nigeria, where I was last week, or Pakistan, to understand how serious would be the effects of Iraq adopting a Sharia-based constitution.

Last year, I happened to be speaking at an inter-faith conference, where I voiced my concerns about Sharia. I was the first speaker to raise that potentially sensitive subject and I did so with trepidation, worried lest I should offend Muslims present, especially a sizeable group of devout Muslim women from Iraq. After my presentation, I went up to them to apologise in case I had upset them. Their response was unequivocal and enthusiastic: to my surprise, they said that before I spoke, they had begun to think they were

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wasting their time coming to the conference. They said that they were grateful to me, because I was the only speaker to raise the issues that really mattered to them, including the question of Sharia law. They then added emphatically, to my great surprise, "We hate Sharia".

Such passionate feelings about Sharia and its implications for the rights of women have been echoed by other Muslim women—the famous writer, Irshad Manji and the Dutch Member of Parliament, Hirsan Ali. I therefore very much hope that not only Christians' anxieties about Sharia law will be taken into account but those of other Iraqi citizens, especially women.

I therefore ask whether the Government will demonstrate a much stronger commitment to the fundamental rights of minorities, including the Christian communities, by putting more pressure on the Iraqi authorities to provide systematic protection for all minorities, so that all can live, work and worship in peace and safety. Will the Government undertake to put pressure on the Iraqi authorities to resist any form of Sharia law, which would inevitably curtail the rights of non-Muslims and of women, as well as denying the fundamental freedom to choose and change religion?

The Christians and other minorities in Iraq feel severely let down by the international community—primarily, perhaps, by the United Kingdom and the United States. It is essential that Britain and America act, and act quickly, to protect the Christians and other vulnerable minorities. We have a particular responsibility to do so, because the present situation is a direct result of American and British intervention. We must therefore accept responsibility and do much more to reverse the spiral of violence in which minorities feel increasingly vulnerable.

Unless Britain and America take appropriate action, we will be responsible for a situation which may deteriorate to such an extent that Iraq will join the tragic catalogue of countries in that part of the world where the rights of minorities, including Christians, are not respected or protected and they are left so vulnerable that their communities wither on the vine and their people emigrate, leaving a land bereft of the priceless traditions of cultural diversity and religious tolerance. That would be a tragic outcome and a betrayal of the principles for which the United States and United Kingdom went to war and continue to engage.

Religious freedom and the rights of all minorities must be the touchstone of success or failure of that engagement.

8.14 pm

Baroness Northover: My Lords, I, too, thank the noble Lord, Lord Hylton, for bringing this matter to the attention of the House today and for introducing it so effectively. His passion was echoed by the noble Lord, Lord Rea, the right reverend Prelate, and the noble Baroness, Lady Cox. The complexity of Iraq was something of which experts warned before the Allies went in. The resonance of the names we have before us—names that go back to medieval history and

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far beyond—should not conceal the fact that the people about whom we are talking are not distant; they are real and vulnerable, especially as power struggles ensue in Iraq and the political map changes.

We have a responsibility here, because we helped to set those power struggles in motion. The removal of Saddam, welcome as that was, was bound, as was warned, to open up a series of complex problems. Some of those who were themselves oppressed under Saddam are all the more keen never to let that happen again to their group. Whether they are as protective of others is another matter.

The precise influence that the British Government have may well be limited. Even in the period when the UK was, in coalition with the US, supposedly running the Coalition Provision Authority, we all know how that was dominated by the US to the exclusion of the UK. But valiant efforts were made by the Allies to ensure that the make-up of temporary bodies was balanced between the various ethnic and religious groups. We know how concerned the Allies were about the engagement of the Sunnis. We also know how concerned they were to ensure that women were fully included in the process and how difficult that proved to be.

All the time that we are actively involved in Iraq, pressure should be brought to bear on those drawing up the new Iraqi constitution, emphasising that peace and stability is likely to result only if all groups are drawn into the process and feel that they are being treated fairly. The position of the Chaldo-Assyrians, the Turkomen and other minorities is clearly a cause for serious concern.

The Iraqi constitution is supposed to be drafted by 15 August. The new system will surely need to be federal, democratic and pluralistic. Most Iraqis seem to agree that a federal structure that assigns certain powers, such as defence and foreign affairs, to central government, should be balanced with the decentralising of other powers to regional and local authorities. The control of oil may need to be assigned to central rather than local government; that is one way of preventing the peeling-off of Iraqi Kurdistan, with the knock-on effects that that would have on Iraq as a whole, minority groups in Iraqi Kurdistan and surrounding countries.

Does the noble Baroness think that if Iraq is divided into federal areas those should be geographical rather than ethnic, in fact to protect minority groups, despite the appeal that divisions might seem to present? Alternatively, is she persuaded that there should be enclaves for some groups, as is suggested by some noble Lords? Guaranteeing minority rights across Iraq is surely the key to stability and progress. Does the noble Baroness anticipate that the Iraqi constitution will include a Bill of individual rights and measures to protect and promote minority group rights? Does she see Islam as the official religion? If so, in what form might that be, as the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, asked, and how far might it run right through society?

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There are strong signs that the rights of minorities are not being respected now. Does the noble Baroness accept, for example, that certain Chaldo-Assyrian groups were not given ballot papers in the January elections? What conclusion has the Electoral Commission come to on that, and what difference might that have made?

I was glad to read the statement of the President of the Kurdistan region, Mr Barzani, that,

"Turkomen and Chaldo-Assyrians are our respected brothers and sisters, and we will do whatever is within our capability and authority for the sake of their well-being . . . We consider ourselves their advocates and defenders of their rights".

I realise that that may be greeted with some scepticism, but I would prefer to regard it as a genuine pledge, publicly made, which must of course be genuinely observed.

The Kurdistan Regional Office declares that the independent Electoral Commission did not deliver sufficient ballot papers to some regions of Iraq. Does the noble Baroness accept its explanation that Kurds lost out here, too, or does she take the contrary view, which is that the Christian community lost out disproportionately? If so, what recompense might there be? When will the Electoral Commission report on that matter?

Over the centuries, as we have heard, the Christian community in Iraq has dwindled. Now, besides the political power struggle taking place there, the Christians are also being targeted by Islamic extremists. Tens of thousands have now fled Iraq. Women have had acid thrown on their faces for not wearing the veil. Amnesty reports assassinations of Chaldo-Assyrians at the hands of both Kurds and Islamic extremists. On a more mundane level, in some areas, reconstruction money seems not to have gone to the Chaldo-Assyrian community although it has gone to the Kurdish community in the same area. Will the noble Baroness comment on that?

I want to refer briefly to another disadvantaged group, the Turkomen. What progress is being made to assess the property rights of those displaced people? What is being done to ensure that there is a fair system of restoring land and property taken from the Turkomen during Saddam's Arabisation programme? The Iraqi Property Claims Commission has that as its task. How is it progressing? Has it handed back a single property? At the moment there are tens of thousands of dispossessed former residents in camps outside the city of Kirkuk.

Iraq remains in a very volatile state. In such circumstances it is not surprising if different groups do their best to secure for themselves a firm foothold on power. Groups that have been oppressed in Iraq and now find themselves in the ascendancy might well remember what it felt like to be oppressed. We must put all the pressure we can on all sides to act with tolerance and inclusiveness in drawing up plans for the future of Iraq. Only then, surely, will it be well placed to become a secure and peaceful state without tectonic plates moving beneath the surface, which threaten to break up and destroy the country and once more imprison its people, and threaten the region as a whole.

Lord Astor of Hever: My Lords, I congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Hylton, on stimulating this most interesting and much needed debate. It is with great sadness and disappointment that I notice how daily reports of violence and bombings in Iraq are currently considered the norm. It is so easy for the media and politicians to bunch all that is happening in Iraq under one hat and miss

what some have called the increasingly desperate situation of the indigenous Chaldo-Assyrian Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities.

There have been significant and repeated attacks on ethnic minority groups in Iraq, both before and since the elections in January this year. I will not reiterate some of the horrors that your Lordships have mentioned tonight, but the continual reports of ethnic minorities such as the Chaldo-Assyrians suffering discrimination cannot be ignored.

I understand from the FCO website that our embassy in Baghdad and our offices in Kirkuk and Basra have been instructed to monitor the situation, especially with regard to the criminal activity based on the widespread belief that Christians are wealthy. Can the Minister update the House with the most recent reports from our offices on that issue? I hope that the noble Baroness can also reiterate Her Majesty's Government's condemnation of attacks of any kind, particularly on Christian churches.

A particular worry is the complaints over Assyrian Christian participation in the spring elections. The elections offered all Iraqis the opportunity to vote for the candidate who would best represent their interests. Groups of Assyrian Christians were registered to take part by the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, but there have been numerous complaints of irregularities in the voting procedures from that minority in particular. Dr Malko, president of the Assyrian National Assembly, has claimed that up to 400,000 Assyrians and other ethnic minorities, such as the Yezidis, Shabak and Turkomen were prevented from voting, as ballot boxes did not reach them, and that the Kurdish militia stopped them going to vote.

The Jubilee campaign reports that ballot boxes stored in Arbil, the stronghold of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, were blocked from being delivered from at least six major Chaldo-Assyrian towns and villages in the Nineveh plains. That left thousands of would-be voters stranded outside polling places with no opportunity to cast their vote.

Some 85 to 90 per cent of the Iraqi expatriate community are Assyrians. The Assyrian international news agency highlighted the fact that 170,000 Assyrians in the United States were left with no polling station. The International Organisation for Migration refused to add further polling stations despite there being more available in other countries such as Australia and Iran. We welcome an imperfect system rather than none at all, especially when out-of-country voting was agreed only a short time before the election, but there are lessons that need to be learnt to ensure

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that there are free and fair procedures for this year's constitutional referendum on 15 October and the elections for a new Iraqi government on 15 December.

The key to protecting the legitimate interests of religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq is ensuring that they are enshrined in the constitution. It is vital that it contains the necessary protections regarding the full religious rights of all individuals to freedom of religious belief and practice; that all Iraqis are equal in their rights, without regard to gender, sect, opinion, belief, nationality, religion or origin; and that they are equal before the law. It should also include what we take for granted: the protection of public and private freedoms, including the right of free expression and peaceable assembly and the right to join associations, unions and political parties freely without unlawful arrest or detention, particularly that based on religious or political belief.

What steps are the Government taking to ensure that the new Iraqi constitution will guarantee the rights of Christians and other religious minorities to full and equal citizenship? Do the Government support the call by the International Crisis Group for the deadline for the constitution to be extended until 15 September? I am sure that it would be better to take a little more time and get it right.

It is all cyclical: the more violence there is, the greater the call for equality and the claims of discrimination. The more secure the country is, the better the

environment in which democratic process, personal freedom and equality can flourish. Does the noble Baroness accept that there is a need to accelerate the rate at which Iraq's indigenous security forces are trained and take further steps to reconstruct the country, at the same time giving young unemployed Iraqis a chance to make a living and not get drawn into violent groups? I look forward to the day when news of death, injury and discrimination in Iraq is no longer the norm.

8.29 pm

Baroness Royall of Blaisdon: My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Hylton, for raising this very important subject for debate and for further highlighting the situation of the Chaldo-Assyrians in Iraq. They are rightly a proud people whose culture and roots in the region can be traced back more than 2,000 years. I am grateful to all noble Lords for their very informed interventions. I will certainly answer as many questions as possible, but those to which I do not respond, I will of course respond to in writing. On behalf of Her Majesty's Government, I condemn all attacks on minorities and places of worship. From the endless media diet of violent attacks in Iraq, Iraq's political process continues to move forward. In his speech to the international conference on Iraq in Brussels on 22 June, the Iraqi Prime Minister confirmed that the inclusion of all Iraqis in the political process is key. That, he said, will undermine those trying to destroy the unity of Iraq. That is particularly important.

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The Government wholeheartedly support those sentiments. We want to see an inclusive constitutional process in which the final product enshrines the rights of all Iraqis, protecting their interests. Key to securing that is the participation of all Iraq's communities in the process. Behind the scenes, we encourage the Transitional National Assembly's constitutional committee to expand its membership to ensure the broadest possible inclusion. We are pleased that that has now been agreed. We now urge the committee and the

transitional Government to pursue aggressive public outreach programmes, further increasing the participation of Iraq's diverse communities.

In answer to questions from my noble friend Lord Rea and other noble Lords on voting irregularities, the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq investigated all complaints of irregularities in voting procedures, including those made by the Chaldo-Assyrians in the 30 January elections. The Independent Electoral Commission wrote to each complainant with its findings. It has conducted a major lessons-learnt exercise with the UN to ensure that in future elections there will be fewer irregularities.

The noble Lord, Lord Hylton, rightly mentioned the return of Chaldo-Assyrians to their land and villages. Our posts report that relations between the Kurds and the Chaldo-Assyrians in the north are good. A successful resettlement programme is under way in the north—for example, in Faysh Khabour.

The noble Baroness, Lady Northover, and the noble Lord, Lord Hylton, raised construction and funds for Chaldo-Assyrians. After decades of damage by a repressive regime, it will of course take time to build Iraqi institutions, improve the infrastructure and for the public sector to flourish. The Iraqi transitional Government are firmly in the lead on reconstruction. They have massive international support: \$32 billion was pledged in Madrid in October in grants and concessional loans. But it is of course 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.

In answer to questions from the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, and the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Rochester, on freedom of worship and the constitution, it would be premature to judge what the contents of the constitution will be, but we must welcome the decision on 4 July to expand the constitutional committee to a commission that includes the broadest possible participation. The Transitional Administrative Law guarantees the full religious rights of all individuals to freedom of religious belief and practices. Her Majesty's Government very much hope that the constitutional drafters will respect that principle. It is of course for Iraqis themselves to decide their constitution.

I return now to the constitutional process, which will not succeed through force of Iraqi will alone. Iraq needs the international community's support, which is why the Government welcome the occasion of the international conference, where more than 80 states and international organisations underscored their willingness to help Iraq rebuild. The United Nations

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has the lead role in co-ordinating international assistance to this constitutional process. We work closely with the UN team on the ground to identify the constitutional committee's priorities and to see how best we can give direct help.

There is only so much that good process and support from Iraq's friends can achieve. Ultimately, Iraqis will debate and decide on the future constitution and the structure of the state. Brave decisions will have to be made.

Compromises will have to be struck. But one tenet that must be preserved is the protection of fundamental human rights. Chaldo-Assyrians, along with the Turkomen, Yazidi and Mandaens, have representatives on the Constitutional Committee. These representatives have been tasked with ensuring that their communities' concerns are reflected and their fundamental rights enshrined. They are playing an active part in contributing to the final draft. In this way we hope that all Iraq's communities, including the Chaldo-Assyrians, will be able to identify with the values and institutions enshrined in the constitution.

As noble Lords have said, until a permanent constitution is put in place, all Iraqis remain subject to Iraq's Transitional Administrative Law. I commend the document to the House. To that end, Article 53(D) guarantees,

"the administrative, cultural, and political rights of the Turcomans, ChaldoAssyrians, and all other citizens".

Interpretation of this article is ultimately a matter for the Iraqi authorities to determine. However, we maintain the view that Article 53(D) does not include the right to an autonomous administrative region for one particular group. It is our understanding that the intention of this provision was not to grant self-governing status to the Chaldo-Assyrians, but to ensure administrative,

cultural and political rights to them as well as to all other citizens.

Furthermore, Article 4 of the Transitional Administrative Law makes clear that the federal system shall be based on geographic and historical realities and the separation of powers and not on origin, race, ethnicity, nationality or confession.

While it is clear that voices among the Chaldo-Assyrians are calling for a separate, autonomous administrative region, it is not clear how widespread is this view. I note, of course, the comments of the noble Lord, Lord Hylton. He mentioned the letter that has been sent to the Prime Minister. It has been received and a response will be issued shortly. I can assure the noble Lord that the three points raised in the letter have been noted and will be carefully considered. FCO officials in Iraq have recently spoken to Mr Kanna about this matter, and he is aware that the letter has been received.

On the final declaration of the Chaldo-Assyrian Conference, it stressed the unity of Iraq. The UK supports an inclusive and practical process which will unite the people of Iraq, giving them stability. The aim of the international community must remain to help all Iraqis to create a united, federal, pluralist Iraq where all Iraqi citizens are secure wherever they may reside in the country and irrespective of race or religious beliefs.

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In response to the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, the new sovereign Iraq is responsible for ensuring that human rights are respected in all areas of Iraqi society. We are working with the Iraqi government and our international partners to development human rights awareness through capacity building, awareness programmes and other training.

The Transitional Administrative Law has committed Iraq's Interim Government to some form of federal structure, with power shared,

"between federal and regional governments, governorates, municipalities, and localities".

The details of much of the federal settlement are undecided and will be resolved by the Constitutional Committee. We will continue our contacts with

the committee and the broader Transitional National Assembly to urge that the rights of all minority groups, including the Chaldo-Assyrians, are accorded their due priority and will remain in close contact with committee representatives from minority groups to ensure that they are being given every right to contribute fully to discussion and to participate in decisions on Iraq's federal structure. We believe that the boundaries and powers of any federal regions are a matter for the Iraqis alone to resolve.

The reports of human rights abuses against Chaldo-Assyrians, which have been so properly but horrifically catalogued this evening, are of deep and grave concern. Our officials in Iraq meet regularly with leaders of the Christian communities to gauge their views and raise our concerns with the Iraqi authorities.

The Transitional Administrative Law recognises the human rights of all minorities in Iraq. We maintain a dialogue with the Iraqi Transitional Government at all levels, making clear our support for the human rights of all Iraqis, and we will continue to lobby for the appointment of a human rights Minister as soon as possible.

We welcome the statement from Iraq's Shia Muslim leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, calling for an end to the attacks and for the need to respect the rights of Chaldo-Assyrians and those of other religious faiths and their right to live in Iraq peacefully. In Basra, where the British deployment in Iraq is centred, we have good relations with Archbishop Kassab, who supports close integration with the Muslim community in the south. In the north, there is evidence of successful integration where Chaldo-Assyrians chose to resettle. The noble Lord, Lord Rea, referred to the role of the EU presidency. This will give us the added advantage of speaking for all member states, which, like us, continue to encourage Iraqis to work to ensure that the fundamental rights of all its citizens are protected, regardless of their race or ethnicity.

The noble Lord also mentioned the *démarche* and the actions being taken by the European Parliament representative in Iraq. I undertake to follow up on this issue to see what is happening.

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The noble Baroness, Lady Northover, referred to the Turkomen. The UK is fully aware of the sufferings of the Turkomen under Saddam Hussein and we regularly meet with the Iraqi Turkomen Front representatives in both London and Iraq.

The Government remain committed to helping Iraq see the transitional process through to a successful conclusion. There are landmarks ahead: agreeing the draft constitution in August; a referendum on it in October; elections and the formation of a constitutional government by the end of December. But that will not be the end of the process. Iraq will continue to need our help. In providing that help, uppermost in our minds will be the need for Iraqis to ensure that the fundamental rights of all its citizens are protected, regardless of their sect or ethnicity, allowing Iraq to turn decisively away from the horrific years of the Ba'athist rule.

Lord Davies of Oldham: My Lords, I beg to move that the House do now adjourn during pleasure until 8.45 pm.

Moved accordingly, and, on Question, Motion agreed to.

[The Sitting was suspended from 8.42 to 8.45 pm.]