

MPs call for self-governing safe haven for Iraqi Christians

BY JOHN PONTIFEX

POLITICIANS joined forces with human rights campaigners to call for the creation of an autonomous region for Iraq's Christian community.

At a packed meeting in the House of Commons, Labour MP Stephen Pound learned up with representatives from Britain's Middle Eastern Christian community to argue for a safe haven for Iraq's Chaldo-Assyrian community.

The speakers said that the long-term survival of Iraq's ancient Christian way of life

hinged on the emergence of such an area. They said it would be the only effective way to stop the exodus from Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Highlighting the key educational and cultural contribution of Iraq's Christian community, they said their continued presence would help to build a tolerant and moderate country.

The conference, organised by the Christian human rights group Jubilee Campaign and the Iraqi Christian political party the Assyrian Democratic Movement, came as chari-

ties such as Aid to the Church in Need stepped up its aid for refugees from Iraq.

Speakers at the meeting called on the Government and its partners in Iraq to act quickly to set up the safe governing region for Christians in Iraq was guaranteed by Iraq's Transitional Administrative Law under Article 53D.

Among the speakers was John Michael from the Assyrian Democratic Movement who identified the Nineveh Plains as the ideal location for the enclave, saying that Iraq's

one million Christians were concentrated in that area with its many Chaldo-Assyrian ancestral towns around Mosul.

New York-based Professor Eden Niboy of the Assyrian Academic Society, said the exodus of all Christians from Iraq — now running at up to 30,000 — would result in the disappearance of their unique culture and language, a form of Aramaic very similar to the language of Christ.

Noting that the Chaldo-Assyrians invented such essentials as the wheel, she said a people whose culture changed

the world could not uphold their language and traditions if they were reduced to a diaspora, spread out all around the world.

Wilfred Wong, the parliamentary officer for the Jubilee Campaign, said such concerns met with a muted response from the Government, whom he accused of indifference to the plight of Iraq's Christian community.

He said: "I have been working to relieve the problems of persecuted Christians for 15 years and I have seldom, if ever, seen a Christian commu-

nity threatened with extinction in the way the Chaldo-Assyrians in Iraq are today."

Mr Pound, who represents Ealing North, home to a large Iraqi Christian community, said the Government should intervene to stamp out ethnic cleansing against the Chaldo-Assyrians, orchestrated not just by fanatic Muslims but by some of the Kurds in the north of the country.

He and Mr Michael called for the repossession of Chaldo-Assyrian towns and villages lost to Muslim control during the Saddam regime. They said

that the Government should fund the resettlement of Chaldo-Assyrians back to Iraq.

Mr Pound said: "Urgent measures must be taken to ensure the survival of the historically rich Chaldo-Assyrian Christian community in Iraq. They are scorned for their faith; they are scorned not for any act of aggression, not for any political reasons, but for what they hold true to in their hearts." Aid to the Church in Need is seeking to step up its support for Iraqi Christians after urgent pleas for help from priests and bishops in the country.