



March 2014

HISTORIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES UNDER SIEGE IN SYRIA

It has been a long and terrible three years for Syria. The violence continues, despite peace talks taking place periodically in Geneva. Christians, who once comprised 10 percent of the population, are caught in the cross-fire between President Bashar al Assad's military and anti-government forces. Christian communities, schools, and homes have been targeted, threatening their historic presence dating back centuries. 70 churches and monasteries are reported to have been destroyed by warring parties. Christians have been kidnapped, held for ransom, tortured and often brutally killed. Two Orthodox bishops from Aleppo were kidnapped in April 2013; 13 Greek Orthodox nuns were taken in December 2013. The nuns were released in March 2014 but there is no word on the fate of the bishops. But Christians are not the only ones affected. According to the UN, over 130,000 Syrians (mostly civilians and many Muslims) have been killed and over eight million have fled their homes, 6.5 million inside Syria and 2.3 million into neighboring countries, since the conflict began in 2011.

Fighting continues throughout Syria and threatens to spill into surrounding countries where tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims remain high. The Syrian opposition remains a fractious group of political dissidents and militia leaders. Significant numbers are extremists, including many foreign fighters with ties to al-Qaeda style ideologies who have entered the fray. The government of Syria is bolstered by Hezbollah, an Iranian-supported Shiite movement whose presence threatens stability in Lebanon and increases the sectarian (Sunni-Shia) nature of the conflict. Both government and opposition forces are accused of having "disappeared" many civilians.

Many Syrian civilians lack the basics of life – food, water, shelter. Humanitarian organizations have had very limited access to internally displaced

persons. The UN Security Council has passed a resolution calling both sides to allow access to humanitarian aid. It remains to be seen what impact it will have on a conflict where civilians have been cut off from aid in the past.

The large number of refugees places an overwhelming burden on adjoining countries. Catholic Relief Services, through its local Church partners, is assisting vulnerable people in affected countries. Since 2011, the U.S. has provided over \$1.7 billion in humanitarian assistance to displaced Syrians.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) continues to urge our nation to work with other governments to obtain a ceasefire, initiate serious negotiations, provide impartial humanitarian assistance, and encourage efforts to build an inclusive society in Syria that protects the rights of all its citizens, including Christians and other minorities. Led by Pope Francis, USCCB vigorously promoted the Day of Prayer and Fasting for Peace in Syria on September 7, 2013 and worked successfully to oppose a Congressional resolution authorizing the use of force in Syria in response to heinous chemical weapons attacks. The bishops of the region were unanimous in opposing outside military intervention which they feared would simply add fuel to the fire.

Syrian Christians have been frustrated that they have not been invited to participate in peace talks or international negotiations about how to resolve the Syrian conflict. They have reached out through the diaspora in Europe, the United States and other countries to share their stories and seek support. They fear that unless their voice is heard and they receive support from the international community, the Christian presence in Syria will dramatically decline, as it did in Iraq.