

UNHCR urged to give more attention to Christian refugees



THE LATEST figures show that currently 65 million people throughout the world are refugees, a number that is beyond the resources of governments and international agencies to cope. Representatives of 14 agencies working with refugees in the Middle East region met with UK officials of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees at the offices of Christian Concern on 10 November.

The meeting, at the request of the UNHCR, heard two hours of evidence-based research and testimonies showing consistent discrimination against non-Muslim minorities among the refugees in the region. A Freedom of Information request from Barnabas Fund recently revealed that only a tiny fraction of those resettled in the UK from Syria and Iraq belong to non-Muslim minorities. Even though Governments recognize that religious minorities have been the victims of genocide, membership of a persecuted religious minority is not included in UNHCR's criteria for vulnerability. Women, children and LGBTI people are considered for special consideration ? but not those who have borne brutality from extremist groups. UNHCR acknowledges that the Churches are one of their most important humanitarian partners but large numbers of Christians have been left in neglect, unable to be registered as refugees, and reliant entirely on charity from the faith-based organisations who receive no money from Governments. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres stated in 2012 that religion is a 'key' to enabling refugees to overcome trauma, make sense of their loss, and rebuild their lives from nothing. To be a secular agency, he added, did not mean that UNHCR should ignore religion and thus the dignity of the people being cared for. Evidence was presented on important concerns: deliberate mistranslations, false data entry, 'lost' files ? and at times abuse and intimidation ? occurring at the hands of Muslim fieldworkers employed by UNHCR. Several NGOs recounted serious breaches of confidentiality and security: in Jordan one Muslim-background Christian found that within 48 hours of interview he was visited by the secret police.

In several countries only a small fraction of eligible Christian refugees have been recalled for RSD interviews leaving them legally vulnerable and unable to access aid and support. Others described bribes being paid or money being sought. Some translators and interviewers double as agents for smugglers and invite Christian applicants to pay them to be moved to safety. Other refugees described home interviews allegedly taking place with only one UNHCR employee present, often a man, and where sexual favours were sought. In some places, the UNHCR has lost control of vetting procedures and training and of some of its camps that are policed by self-appointed Sharia councils and infiltrated by extremists. Christians said they avoid these camps because of persistent violence and persecution, including the rape of women, girls and young men. In Iraq the US administration bypasses UNHCR and sends aid direct to the Churches and FBOs supporting the minorities. Australia also bypasses UNHCR in selecting the refugees it takes in. The meeting heard a number of calls. These included:

? fair and equal access to RSD, aid, and selection for resettlement

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? UNHCR staff being trained to understand that being a member of a persecuted religious minority should trigger a protection enquiry

? an immediate review of com-plaints and abuses and of employees who appear to have occasioned them, and

? the employment of faith-con-gruent interviewers and transla-tors.

In solidarity with those perse-cuted globally for their faith, the Red Wednesday campaign on 22 November, is asking people to wear, and church buildings to be lit up in, red.

<https://acnuk.org/campaign/red>

Source: Church Newspaper