

Pope, Kurdish leader meet about Iraqi Christians

Sarah Delaney Catholic News Service | Feb. 25, 2011

VATICAN CITY -- Pope Benedict XVI met with the president of Iraqi Kurdistan to discuss the plight of the Christian minority in Iraq, the Italian bishops' news agency reported.

In a private audience Feb. 23, Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq, told the pope his administration would continue to support the thousands of Christians who have relocated there following sectarian violence in the rest of the country.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, confirmed that the meeting took place but did not give details.

In a Feb. 25 report, the news agency SIR said Barzani gave the pope a report with statistics regarding Christians who have always lived in the northern region of Iraq and those who have arrived more recently to escape anti-Christian violence and threats.

According to a statement from the regional government, more than 10,000 Christian families have fled from other parts of Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Since then, several churches have been the targets of deadly strikes by suspected militants. The latest attack caused the deaths of 58 people who had been worshiping in the Syrian Catholic Church in Baghdad on Oct. 31, 2010.

Pope Benedict has repeatedly called for protection of the Christian minority in the Middle East and for universal respect for religious freedom.

The government statement said that Pope Benedict expressed his gratitude to Barzani for his administration's support of the Christian community in Iraq.

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