

Syrian Christian refugees turn to churches for help

James Martone Catholic News Service | Mar. 28, 2013
Istanbul

Churches and monasteries in Turkey are struggling to shelter a rising number of Syrian Christian refugees who are reluctant to seek help at government-run relief camps because of reported Muslim extremism, said a Catholic Relief Services staffer.

Sleiman Saikali, program officer for the U.S. bishops' relief and development agency, told Catholic News Service that he met Christian refugees living in and around the southeastern Turkish cities of Mardin and Midyat; some lived in churches and two ancient monasteries.

"All of these are about 200 people. Other Christians are coming day after day," said Saikali, who was in the region with a CRS delegation at the end of February looking at ways to help Syrian refugees on both sides of the border.

The Christians are among the tens of thousands of Syrians refugees, most of whom are Muslim, fleeing to Turkey from Syria, where pro-government forces are engaged in armed conflict with rebel groups in a war the United Nations estimates has killed 70,000 people in two years.

Turkey has provided aid and shelter to more than 150,000 refugees in border camps. More than 70,000 others are living outside the camps with little government assistance, according to the U.N.

Saikali said Syrian Christians told him they were afraid go to the relief camps "because [of] who is going to the camps: Muslims, but not the Muslims who were living with Christians [in Syria]. They are from [Muslim] fundamentalist groups."

A U.N. official in Turkey who asked not to be identified acknowledged Feb. 16 that Syrian Christians were living outside of the camps and that many had little money. The official said many Muslim refugees also refused to go to the camps, but for other reasons. In some instances, the official explained, some of the refugees are seen as being aligned with the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad and were threatened by camp residents.

Asked if Muslim extremism was a problem in any of the camps, the official who had visited one of the sites said, "Of course, we cannot rule it out."

A spokesman for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees was cautious March 7 in addressing reports of Muslim extremism in the camps.

"I don't have knowledge of such reports, which doesn't mean there are not such reports," spokesman Metin Corabatir told CNS.

UNHCR helps manage the Turkish relief camps. Turkish officials said the government has spent more than

\$600 million aiding refugees since Syria's civil war began in 2011.

Saikali said refugees he met also told him of kidnappings on the Syrian side of the border. Syrian Christians were mostly targeted, he said, with the kidnappers asking up to \$200,000 in ransom.

"Those kidnapped are Christians because they are [considered] in a better economic situation," Saikali said the Christian refugees told him. The kidnappers appeared to be neither from the government side nor with the rebels, and that "some are not even Syrian," he said.

In addition to the assistance from churches and monasteries in Mardin and Midyat, the incoming Christian refugees are receiving assistance from local Christian families in the area, Saikali said. But he added that some of the refugees were still in "urgent need of rent money" to pay for apartments and rooms to live in.

CRS has assisted Turkey and other nations bordering Syria in providing basic needs for some of the more than 1 million Syrian refugees who have fled the war.

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