

Armed men kidnap eight Christians in northern Iraq

ROME - Armed men kidnapped eight Christians on their way home from university exams in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul.

Seven students and one professor were taken at gunpoint June 20 after a group of men forced the bus in which the students were traveling to come to a halt, an informed source told Catholic News Service June 21.

Some 50 students and professors were riding the bus heading home from exams in Mosul when "a caravan of cars" surrounded and stopped the vehicle, according to a June 20 AsiaNews report.

Both AsiaNews and the unnamed source said only the Christians were targeted and taken away after the kidnappers looked at the passengers' identification cards.

Iraqi identification cards specify a person's religious affiliation, the source said, and "just by reading someone's name you can know they are Christian, Shiite, or Sunni."

The source said the female passengers were left alone, although the kidnappers took their cell phones.

The kidnappers were demanding "a lot of money" in ransom from the church and the victims' families, he said.

The kidnapped victims are Syrian and Chaldean Catholics from the village of Qaraqosh - a predominantly Christian village near Mosul, he said.

Both he and AsiaNews reported police witnessed the kidnapping and did not intervene.

"There were police cars 100 meters near (where the bus stopped) and they didn't do anything," he said.

He said students on the bus noticed the kidnappers were wielding the same kind of

guns Iraqi police normally use.

He also said even though police salaries are among the highest salaries in Iraq it would not be surprising if the police and kidnappers were collaborating because “here (in Iraq) there is no law; everybody does what he wants.”

Christians, students, intellectuals and other professionals are under threat, he said, and are fleeing to neighboring Syria or Kurdistan, in northern Iraq.

Demands for money are constant, he said, even without kidnappings.

He said people calling themselves mujahedeen telephone clergy members, monks and bishops insisting the church leaders help fund attacks against U.S.-led troops in Iraq.

“They say you Christians are doing nothing (to fight), so you must pay,” he said.