

Baghdad archbishop denounces kidnapping of Iraqi Christians

LONDON – Latin-rite Archbishop Jean Sleiman of Baghdad, Iraq, has denounced the continuing kidnapping of Christians in his country and urged the government to take more action to end such crimes.

He said he personally had received “countless” reports of kidnappings, most generally for large ransoms.

“The media ignores this matter,” he said in an Aug. 22 interview with the British branch of Aid to the Church in Need, a Catholic charity helping persecuted Christians. “It is important to ask the government to pay attention to these issues and not only the general political situation.”

“It is not only Christians who are targeted but other groups,” he said. “And yet the Christians feel the injustice of the situation very keenly because they have never played any part in the conflict within the country.”

Archbishop Sleiman said families and friends of hostages often had come to him for help. Although money was the main motive for the kidnappings, he said, Islamic religious extremism was often an important factor, especially in the targeting of Christians.

He described how on Aug. 19 he met a Christian man who had two close family members kidnapped and found dead a month later. On Aug. 18 he was visited by a woman who wanted money to help her pay a \$20,000 ransom for the release of her 19-year-old daughter.

Kidnappings have plagued the Christian minority of Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. A number of priests and bishops have been kidnapped or murdered.

They include Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho of Mosul, who was found in a shallow grave in March, two weeks after he was dragged from his car by armed men. The demands for his release reportedly included a \$1 million ransom.

In July Pope Benedict XVI discussed the plight of Iraqi Christians with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki during a meeting in Castel Gandolfo, Italy.

The pope renewed his “condemnation of violence, which continues to strike different parts of the country almost every day without sparing the Christian communities who strongly feel the need to have greater security,” the Vatican said in a statement.

Al-Maliki responded by saying the persecution of Christians would not be tolerated, and he invited Iraqi Christian refugees to return home.