

Canadian Catholics boost sponsorship of Iraqi Christian refugees

TORONTO - Spurred by the exodus of Iraqi Christians, the Toronto Archdiocese doubled the number of Iraqi refugee families it sponsored in 2010 to 190.

The boom in the resettlement of Iraqis was fueled by 40 new refugee sponsorship committees or initiatives aimed at rescuing Christians fleeing the violence-torn country. The archdiocese's Office for Refugees is handling the cases of about 250 refugees from around the world.

The Catholic response to the plight of Iraqi Christian refugees has been the most significant development in Canada's refugee resettlement system since faith groups pushed the government to create a private sponsorship system 30 years ago in response to the thousands of Vietnamese fleeing by boat from their homeland, according to Martin Mark, executive director of the refugee office.

"It is you. It is not the government of Canada" who recognized the urgency of the Iraqi refugee crisis, Mark told more than 100 Iraqi Christians and parish refugee advocates at the Salam Club in Toronto Dec. 3.

To make the sponsorship system more responsive, the archdiocese has launched a special fund that will help parishes organize fundraising efforts and manage expenses for refugee resettlement. Sponsoring a refugee family can cost as much as \$40,000.

Mark spent the summer in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan interviewing Christian

refugees and compiling a list of 700 eligible families. The list has been distributed to diocesan refugee offices across Canada so they can be matched up with parishes willing to sponsor the newcomers.

Refugee sponsorship will not solve the problems of Middle Eastern Christians terrorized by militias and struggling under oppressive regimes, Toronto Archbishop Thomas Collins said after reading a five-minute statement during the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East at the Vatican in October. While it is important to provide a solution to Christians who can't return home to Iraq, it is just as important that Canadian Catholics support Christian communities in the Middle East, the archbishop said.

"It (the Middle East) is our home. It is where Christianity comes from," Archbishop Collins said. "We are one body, one body in Christ, and we do not stand alone.

"It's outrageous that Christians should not be able to live in the Middle East in peace, where they have lived for 2,000 years."

The Catholic Near East Welfare Association Canada has received donations from Muslims concerned by how Christian communities are being decimated in the region, said Carl Hetu, the association's national secretary in Canada.

"The Christians of the Middle East, they're being murdered. They're being attacked. People need to know. They need to know what's going on," Hetu said.

Sts. Peter and Paul Parish in Mississauga, Ontario, recently formed a sponsorship group. Teresa Olegario, a group member, said it will be a year before the group is ready to welcome refugees.

"The most important thing that was said (by Mark) is that we must be persistent," she said.