

# Iraqi Christians resettled in Canada look forward to quiet Christmas

EDMONTON, Alberta - Iraqi Ziyad Matti and his wife, Dalia Hikmat, have not had a proper Christmas in years.

They are looking forward to a quiet, peaceful celebration of Christmas as they settle in their new country and learn their way around.

The couple and their 1-year-old daughter, Kristel, arrived in Edmonton in early December from Lebanon, where they had been living since their escape from Iraq in 2009.

They are staying at the Rotary Centre for New Canadians, a complex for refugees and immigrants run by Catholic Social Services. Matti is a computer engineer, and Hikmat a chemical engineer. They are Orthodox Christians.

The couple spoke to the Western Catholic Reporter, Edmonton's archdiocesan newspaper, Dec. 13 through an interpreter, Azhar Aziz, a staff member at the Rotary Centre.

Before the American-led invasion in 2003, there was harmony among religions in Iraq. Christians would celebrate Christmas openly and their Muslim friends would say "Merry Christmas to you," recalled Hikmat.

They would set up a well-decorated Christmas tree in the living room, surrounded by presents, and a Nativity scene.

On Christmas Eve, they would attend Mass late at night and the next day they would celebrate with friends, dining on turkey and opening presents. Those were happy times.

Everything changed in 2003 when groups began bombing Christian churches and persecuting Christians.

"Before that, all religions lived together in harmony. Now they are fighting

Christians,” Matti said. “New faces came to Iraq and started to fight the Christian people.”

The couple spoke of a society dominated by fear where some groups use Islam to justify violence and divide Iraqi society.

They recalled when they were living in Baghdad and a Christian church was bombed, and many people were killed. They eventually moved to a small village near the city of Mosul.

As Christian persecution continued, they celebrated Christmas quietly in their own home. The Nativity scene had to be hidden under the tree in case someone came in. Instead of going to Mass at night, they would have to go at 6 a.m.

And there was no more turkey for Christmas dinner because they could not afford it.

Hikmat said restrictions and danger are all over Iraq, especially for Christians. Once her brother and sister were going to college when an armed gang stopped them. They told her to start wearing a hijab and told them they could not be seen together as woman and man.

“This is a warning. Next time we’ll kill you,” she said they were told.

Asked if Iraq will ever return to peace, the couple said, “No way.” However, they said, they hope and pray that better times return to their homeland.

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