

Iraqi Embassy to the Vatican commemorates attack on Baghdad church

ROME - Two Iraqi women wore, pinned to their lapels, pictures of the loved ones they lost in a terrorist attack on a church in Baghdad. One had photos of her husband and young son, and the other had a creased black and white portrait of her mother stuck securely over their hearts.

Others wore rosaries around their necks or holy medals fastened to their shirts as a way to remember and pay witness to their Christian faith.

Forty-seven Iraqi Christian survivors of the attack Oct. 31 on the Syrian Catholic church in Baghdad were among the many guests invited to a special commemoration of the 58 people who died during the terrorist siege of the church and the military raid that brought the blockade to an end.

The commemoration Dec. 9 was held at the Iraqi Embassy to the Vatican and was organized together with the Iraqi Embassy to Italy.

One woman, who asked not to be named, said she lost her father, her brother, his wife and their four-month-old baby who was bludgeoned to death by the terrorist attackers. Her three sisters were spared because they stayed home that Sunday morning, she said.

The petite 24-year-old woman said with a shy smile that her loved ones "had the best death you could have: inside a church while praying. It's a testament of faith."

She was one of 26 injured Iraqis - including three children - who came to Rome to receive treatment at the Gemelli Hospital. The Italian foreign ministry arranged for the injured Iraqis and 21 accompanying family members to fly to Rome.

By Dec. 9, most of them were no longer hospitalized, but they were awaiting news from the Italian government about their fate.

“They’re looking for refugee status and waiting for a response,” said Father Hani al-Jameel.

Many would like to stay on in Italy, but their temporary visas expire Dec. 15 “and they don’t know what will happen. They are not tranquil about it,” he told Catholic News Service.

The Iraqi priest from Nineveh is studying in Rome and lives near the hospital at a large religious center. He said he borrowed two vans the other day and picked up the Iraqi families to take them to the center and its outdoor grounds for a walk and snack near a statue of Mary.

He celebrated a Syrian Mass for them and later that evening they had dinner together and played “tombola,” an Italian variation of bingo.

“We even had prizes” for the winners, he said.

“It was like a party. For a few moments, people could forget a bit,” he said.

Father al-Jameel said it has been difficult to figure out what is best for the Iraqi families, many of them women. Most want to stay in Italy, but it would represent “a huge loss” for Iraq and the families they leave behind, he said.

“My advice is for them to go back, but I feel their fear. Maybe if they can stay awhile and when they feel more certain maybe then they will return, he said.

The call to not give in to fear and to stay in Iraq was echoed in the speeches at the embassy event, which was attended by Vatican diplomats and officials, including Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, and Monsignor Khaled Akasheh, head of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue’s section for relations with Muslims.

Archbishop Jules Mikhael al-Jamil, the Syrian Catholic Church’s representative to the Vatican, said, “We are Iraqis. We will not emigrate.”

Archbishop al-Jamil criticized the “infidels who have nothing to do with religion” who are trying to eliminate Christians from the Middle East by terrorizing them with

threats, kidnappings and killings.

He called on Muslims to come out more forcefully against terrorist elements and called on Western nations to help improve security in Iraq to favor the creation of “a new Orient that would be like a mosaic of different religions.”