



Relatives of the dead
come to pray and mourn
at the Our Lady of
Salvation cathedral in
Baghdad. Blood and
debris still litter the site

WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN US?

After Al-Qaeda murdered 46 Christians in a Catholic cathedral in Baghdad, many of the survivors fled to Paris. Here they recall the terrifying siege, and ask: is the Iraqi government colluding in religious persecution?

Report by Hala Jaber and Christine Toomey



The last words Father Thair read from the Bible were prophetic. Faced with a congregation increasingly persecuted for their faith as Christians in Iraq, the young priest's voice rose as he came to Matthew 16, verse 18: "On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it."

Within minutes of closing his lectionary at 5.30pm on October 31 last year, an unimaginable hell was unleashed on the Cathedral of Our Lady of Salvation in the heart of Baghdad. Over the next five hours, Al-Qaeda terrorists would subject his flock to such savagery that the attack on the Orthodox Catholic cathedral now ranks as one of the worst on any Christian church in recent history.

At first, Father Thair thought the sound of a distant explosion and gunfire was just random shooting, routine for the war-weary population of Iraq. In order to calm worshippers, the 32-year-old priest leant to one side of the altar to push a button activating a tape recording of soothing hymns. He then raised a cross high above his head and began to pray aloud to the Virgin Mary for their protection.

Sitting just in front of the altar, proudly watching her son, was Father Thair's mother Um Raed, together with the priest's elder brother, 34-year-old Raed and his wife and 10-month-old daughter. It is Um Raed, tears rolling down her cheeks, who relates what happened next, after a second deafening explosion rocked the rear of the cathedral: "I turned and saw gunmen with suicide belts strapped around their waists scrambling in through a hole they'd blown in the

church doors," she says. "They were screaming 'Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!'" ("God is great!")

She saw another priest, 27-year-old Father Wassim, staggering close to the cathedral entrance, pleading with the terrorists to stop. "They shot him through the mouth, then again in the chest, shouting 'We've killed an infidel!'," says Um Raed, who, turning back in horror to face her own son, saw him fall on the steps of the altar, gasping, "God to thee I commend my soul."

"I saw his blood spill across the floor. I fell to my knees and started rubbing my hand through his blood. They shot me too. They shot my hand in my son's blood."

As terrified worshippers threw themselves between the pews, she saw her eldest son push his wife and baby daughter in the direction of the sacristy beside the altar, where other worshippers were scrambling for shelter, before reaching out to embrace his brother. Then they shot him.

"Both my sons fell by the altar," says Um Raed. "I lay between them. They shot me again in my leg."

Desperate to protect his mother, Raed hissed at her, "Mama, don't move, be still."

"I lay between my sons. I lay there thinking Raed was keeping quiet too, so they wouldn't know he was alive. I kept my hand in my son's blood, I caressed it as I lay there listening to the gunmen shout out, 'We've killed an infidel! We've killed another

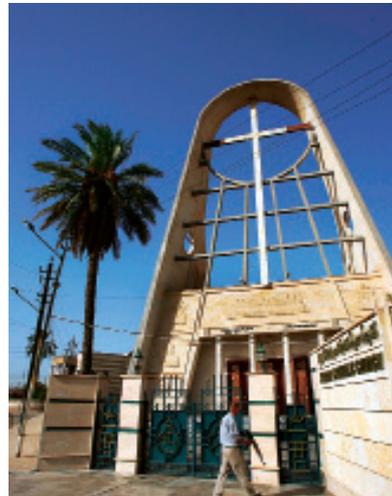


one! We have hostages!' as they shot more people. When their ammunition ran out, they started throwing grenades," she says.

She lay between her sons for the next five hours, until after 10pm, hardly daring to breathe, as Iraqi security forces laid siege to the cathedral under attack by the 10 terrorists. By dawn the next day – ironically All Saints' Day, which for centuries has marked the persecution of early Christians – 44 worshippers, two priests and seven security forces' personnel lay slaughtered, with around 60 more wounded.

The government of Nouri al-Maliki has been severely criticised for allowing the siege of the cathedral to continue for so many hours. The building sits on the banks of the Tigris, close to the Green Zone, the armoured heart of Baghdad. The government argues its forces would have risked the lives of even more had they stormed the building earlier.

It is unclear how many of those who died were killed in





Clockwise from left: Um Raed, who lost both her sons in the massacre, receives wellwishers' personal effects in the sacristy; and the exterior of the cathedral

the final moments of the attack, when terrorists detonated their suicide belts shortly after security forces stormed the building, at around 10.15pm. Many Iraqi Christians argue that had a mosque been targeted, security forces would have ended the siege much earlier.

Um Raed stares out of the window of a bleak refugee hostel in Paris as she relives her sons' final hours. Since last November she has been undergoing treatment at a military hospital on the outskirts of the French capital for the wounds she sustained during the siege. Together with 36 other survivors and 20 of their relatives, Um Raed was flown to France a week after the catastrophe for emergency medical care.

The humanitarian mission to bring those most seriously wounded in the attack to Paris was announced within days of the disaster, amid much fanfare from the French government. France has long cherished its reputation as protector of the Christian faith in the Middle East and it was no coincidence that its foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, spoke effusively of his country "never abandoning Christians" a few days later when he travelled to Lebanon. Eric Besson, minister for immigration, said France

would grant asylum to 150 Iraqi Christians — those wounded in the attack and members of their families. An initial group of 57 would be airlifted to France on November 7, with a second group of 93 following "in a few days or weeks". "France is the leading land for asylum in Europe and the world's second behind the United

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States," Besson boasted. "We are the European country that receives the most refugees persecuted because of their political opinions, their religion or the colour of their skin."

Besson was the minister at the heart of an international outcry last summer over France's mass deportation of Roma families back to Bulgaria and Romania, and critics of the French government were quick to question whether the hastily hatched humanitarian mission was an attempt by the French government to redeem itself after this debacle.

Regardless of whether or not public relations played a part in prompting the speedy evacuation operation, the plight of those already flown to France and others left behind quickly became overshadowed by both internal French politics and furious international debate over whether Christians should stay in Iraq and other areas of the Middle East where they face persecution. Some argue if they are encouraged to leave, the region will effectively be ethnically cleansed of its minority Christian communities.

As this debate continues, Um Raed and the other wounded survivors and relatives already in Paris have been left in agonising limbo, deeply concerned for the safety of those left behind and unsure when their loved ones will eventually be allowed to join them. Of the second promised transport of 93 relatives of those injured in the siege, only eight had been flown to Paris by the first week of April, with another 15 expected to follow before Easter.

Despairing of the slow progress, seven of those airlifted to France have already returned to Baghdad. Those who remain have been assured by the French authorities that their families will be allowed to follow them to Paris. However, they have been outraged by the posturing of religious leaders who have urged Christians to stand fast in Iraq, come what may. These include the Beirut-based patriarch of the Syrian Catholic Church, Ignace Joseph III Younan, who has called on all Christians to stay in the region.

"The patriarch and other leaders of the church who call for their people to remain in Iraq are totally out of touch with what the majority of Christians in the country think," says Elish Yako, an Iraqi Christian and head of the Paris-based Aid Association for Christians of the Orient, which has been providing support for those

already in France. "How can you tell a family with children to stay and confront death when even Christ and his disciples had to flee for their lives many times? If these religious leaders don't change their opinion soon they could find themselves losing their authority just like other deposed figures in the Middle East, such as Hosni Mubarak," he warns.

As Um Raed sits in the Paris hostel waiting for news of family members left behind she begins to talk of how life was for her family in Baghdad before tragedy struck. Um Raed is 53 but ➤➤➤➤➤



Clockwise from left: the two priests executed in the attack; some of the survivors enjoy a day out in Paris, where they have been granted asylum; and the church's side door

looks much older, a hard life having been etched into her features long before that terrible day. After her husband died of a brain haemorrhage, leaving her to bring up six children alone, the family scraped by on the small amount her three sons — Thair, Raed and their youngest brother Uday — earned sewing garments in their uncle's tailor shop at the end of their school day.

The family is originally from Iraq's northern city of Mosul, home to a large proportion of the country's Christians, who numbered around five million before the first Gulf war in the early 1990s. In the wake of that conflict, many Iraqi Christians — descendants of ethnic Assyrians settled in the region for nearly 2,000 years — left for other countries in the Middle East, such as Syria and Jordan, and also the United States and Europe. By 2003, around 1.2 million Christians remained, but since then the numbers are believed to have dwindled to around 600,000, many still concentrated in predominantly Christian enclaves around Mosul in the north, with around 150,000 in Baghdad in mixed Muslim-Christian communities.

Before the fall of Saddam Hussein, Um Raed says the mixed neighbourhood of al-Zaafarana, where the family lived, was safe. Following the 2003 invasion, viewed by many in Iraq as a take-over by Christian Western powers, escalating violence between warring Shi'ite and Sunni Muslim factions and insurgents began to

be matched by increasing attacks on Christian targets. Churches were bombed, priests assassinated. In October 2006 the mutilated body of an Orthodox priest in Mosul, an Al-Qaeda hotbed, was found with his head, arms and legs hacked off. The following year the secretary to an archbishop in the city was shot dead in his church.

This violence has escalated significantly in the past two years; in January 2008 three Chaldean and Assyrian churches in Mosul, two in Kirkuk and four in Baghdad were bombed by Al-Qaeda sympathisers. After a two-week killing spree in Mosul in February 2010 that left eight Christians dead, some Assyrian groups called for the

WHEN ONE MOTHER SAID SHE DID NOT KNOW HOW TO STOP HER INFANT CRYING, A GUNMAN AIMED AT THE CHILD'S HEAD AND FIRED. THEN HE SHOT THE CHILD'S MOTHER, FATHER AND GRANDFATHER

formation of a separate province in the Nineveh plains north-east of Mosul, where Christians could form a majority and be protected by their own police and local militia.

"In the past few years we began to grow much more afraid. We only left the house when we had to," says Um Raed, her eldest daughter Najlaa sitting, nodding, beside her. Najlaa, 36, left her husband and five children behind in the village where they live near to Mosul when she accompanied her injured mother to Paris.

"Immediately after the fall of Saddam nothing much changed," says Najlaa. "We continued to dress normally. We would go to clubs. Until 2008 life was more or less normal. Then we started hearing of entire families killed because they were Christians. All Christians became more afraid. But despite this we left things in the hands of God." All this changed on October 31 last year, when both of her brothers perished.

The terrifying scene faced by those in the sacristy before Iraqi security forces eventually brought the five-hour siege to an end is described by another survivor who took refuge there. Samer, like most of those evacuated, doesn't want to reveal his full name for fear that family members left behind in Iraq may be targeted. The 28-year-old was left physically unscathed but deeply psychologically scarred by the attack.

"When you're stuck in a small room with around a hundred people for hours it's already a



crisis,” he says. “Add to that the firing of weapons, explosion of grenades, the screaming of your loved ones and friends as they are being killed and you are unable to do anything, how would you feel? What would you do knowing that those outside are trying to storm the room in order to kill you too? How would you feel as you smell death and blood and burning flesh and hair? What do you do when someone standing next to you drops dead?” Samer says, as he sits in the military hospital in Paris where his younger brother Emil is being treated for gunshot wounds. “When another in front of you has his hand blown off and blood splatters on the faces of those around you? When you try to administer first aid to someone you think is wounded but then realise has died? When you try to protect those alive and terrified with you at same time as trying to save yourself?”

Samer and Emil were sitting three rows from the altar when gunmen stormed the cathedral. Emil was shot and collapsed between the pews. Samer, thinking his brother dead, threw himself to the floor and crawled to the sacristy where he and others quickly barricaded themselves in with a bookcase jammed against the door. “Every beat of my heart in that place felt like a year.

Every scream we heard outside took part of my life away,” he says.

Above the screaming, Samer heard a woman weeping for help, pleading for the door to the sacristy to be opened so she could hide too. He realised it was his childhood friend Raghda, who he knew had gone to church that day with her husband for a blessing after discovering she was expecting their first child. Despite the cries of others in the sacristy not to open the door, Samer heaved the barricade away just enough to drag his injured friend inside.

“Raghda was sobbing, telling us they had killed her husband,” says Samer, who then hurled a book at the one light in the sacristy, plunging those around him into semi-darkness. Outside, terrorists were picking off worshippers one by one. Husbands were slaughtered in front of wives. Babies were killed in front of parents. One mother who whimpered that she did not know how to stop her infant crying was told by one of the

gunmen “I’ll show you how!” He took aim at the child’s head and fired, then shot the baby’s mother, father and grandfather.

Thwarted by the barricade against the sacristy door, terrorists then started throwing light flares and sound grenades through a ventilation shaft into the sealed room. Samer describes how one man jammed beside him was hit by shrapnel. It was 34-year-old Mohammed Munir, who had only been back in Baghdad a month, after five years studying engineering in Russia. Shrapnel blew off his left arm below the elbow and the toes off his sister Manal, beside him. “She fell on top of those sitting on the floor, spilling her blood. I thought both would bleed to death,” says Samer. When Samer noticed Raghda’s breathing was growing heavier, he begged her to talk to him. “Then I felt something warm on my leg. It was Raghda’s blood. She was bleeding to death. She died in my arms, her unborn child too... her only crime being that she prayed to her god.”

Emil survived; so did Mohammed Munir and his sister Manal. They were accompanied to Paris by their younger brother Murad, who explodes with anger at the way his siblings and others in the cathedral were left for so long in the hands of the terrorists: “I blame Maliki and his government. Why weren’t we defended? Why were we left there to be slaughtered?”

Qussai was one of the few who witnessed what happened outside the cathedral in the early stages of the assault. The 31-year-old volunteer guard for the cathedral, who had worshipped there since childhood, had accompanied his wife and baby daughter into the cathedral that day before taking up his position patrolling the grounds. Qussai said that for some weeks before he had noticed security around the cathedral had grown lax. While government buildings close by had their usual state security armed details, an armoured personnel carrier, which was normally parked in a street adjacent to the cathedral for the church’s protection, had not been there. When Qussai called the security

forces to ask why not, he was told there were not enough forces to protect all areas and that the APC had been directed elsewhere by the Ministry of the Interior. Qussai, like many Iraqi Christians, believes there was more to it than that: “Ever since 2003 we have heard we are an unwanted minority. Our lives changed. We did what we could to protect ourselves.”

On the day of the assault, Qussai and nine other volunteers ►►►



were, as usual, only lightly armed. Unknown to those inside the cathedral, the loud explosion they heard before the building was stormed was a car bomb detonated in a street nearby, causing a diversion so that the terrorists could mount their attack. When Qussai saw terrorists hauling rice sacks full of weapons over a back perimeter wall of the cathedral he began shooting, hitting one assailant before a grenade was hurled in his direction, ripping open his stomach.

As Qussai dragged himself towards the shelter of a small guardroom in the grounds, he saw terrorists carry the man he had shot to the cathedral entrance and detonate the suicide belt he was wearing to blow a hole in its doors. “I have never seen anything so horrific,” says Qussai. “The lower part of the man’s torso lay propped against the church as they stormed in.”

Once inside the guardroom, Qussai heard the voice of a woman crying behind the door of a cupboard. He opened it to find his wife and 10-month-old daughter cowering inside; his wife had left the cathedral minutes before it was attacked to breastfeed their baby and ducked there for cover when the car bomb exploded.

“When she saw me she started to wail,” says Qussai. “I told her to tear down a curtain to wrap around my stomach and then pushed her back inside the cupboard with my daughter and told her not to make a sound.” For the next five hours Qussai sat propped against the cupboard door in a pool of his own blood until he was found by security forces. He seethes with anger in the French hospital. “What happened wasn’t random and I will never forgive the government. Where was the army? Where were the police? Where was the state? I ask the British government and the West to save all Iraqi Christians from the plan to eradicate them,” he pleads.

Like most of those evacuated, Qussai is in no doubt he wants to stay in France — if his wife and baby daughter are allowed to join him. But the fate of family members like his, left behind in Iraq, quickly became ensnared in the changing political fortunes of those who engineered the evacuation. Shortly after the airlift, Bernard Kouchner, a humanitarian, fell out of favour with Nicolas Sarkozy’s conservative government. Kouchner won few friends in France when he spoke out publicly against the mass deportation of Roma; one opinion poll saw his popularity plummet by 11 points at a time when that of extremist anti-immigration demagogue Jean-Marie Le Pen rose by six.

France is Europe’s “leading land for asylum” in terms of the total number of those of all nationalities who apply for refuge there: 47,625



MUHAMED (23) was a bodyguard of one of the congregation. He was shot after he went to his client’s aid, and was treated here at Choisy-le-Roi clinic in Paris. All the wounded have been promised asylum in France

in 2009 (the last year for which full figures are available from the EU’s office of statistics), compared with 32,935 in Germany and 31,670 in Britain, which ranked third. But the total number granted asylum or “exceptional leave to remain” in France that year was 5,365, compared with 2,295 in Germany and 7,160 here. Britain granted asylum to 240 Iraqis in 2009, bringing the total number since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 to more than 3,000. France granted asylum to 20 Iraqis in 2009, with the total number since 2003 standing at around 1,300. The majority of

politicians are infuriated by suggestions that Western countries should open their gates to an exodus. While members of the Syrian Orthodox faith are autonomous from the Catholic Church, with their own unique liturgy and tradition, they continue to recognise the Pope’s authority, and as such the Vatican has urged Christians who do leave Iraq not to sell their property — so that they or their children would have a place to which they could one day return. Such considerations could not be further from the minds of those who survived the carnage of the cathedral in

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those granted asylum in France have been Christian. For those evacuated, more worrying than concerns over immigration policy in France is the posturing of politicians in Iraq — and of religious leaders internationally — about the fate of Christians who remain. Some senior Iraqi clerics, such as Archbishop Athanasios Dawood of the Syrian Orthodox Church in London, have called openly for Iraqi Christians to flee the country. “If they stay they will be finished one by one,” he says. Others, including Ignatius Metti Metok, Syriac Catholic Bishop of Baghdad, have urged them to stay, to bear witness to the faith.

Nevertheless, there are reports of a significant increase in the number of Christian families requesting baptism certificates in case these are needed by Western embassies for visa processing. There have also been accusations that the Iraqi government is deliberately delaying applications for passports for Iraqi Christians trying to leave the country.

Despite charges that their government is failing to protect Christian minorities, many Iraqi

Baghdad. Asked if she would contemplate return to Iraq one day, Um Raed sighs. Seeking more security elsewhere, two of her daughters had already left the country with their husbands and children before the attack.

“It’s a hard question. There is so much sadness in my heart,” she says. “Sometimes I would like to go back to sit by my sons’ graves, to see them that way. But then I think I have to make sure that the life of my one remaining son and his family is better, safer.”

Also languishing in the same asylum hostel as Um Raed is Um Wassim, the mother of the second priest killed, Father Wassim. She has no intention of ever returning. “What is there for us in Iraq now? What is most precious has been destroyed. When the invasion happened we thought things would be better, that the Americans had come to give us freedom and democracy. But in reality they have destroyed us. They destroyed everything, even our Christianity” ■

Additional reporting by Ali Rifat