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Mandaean Human Rights Group

The Mandaean Human Rights Report Update on the Situation of Mandaean in the Middle East December 2012

Urgent action is needed to save the Mandaean refugees in Syria

Since the release of the annual report of the MHRG in October 2012 where we voiced our worrying concern about the situation of the Mandaean religious refugees in Syria we find that the situation is a lot more alarming now with the deterioration of the security situation in Syria, where we have 2000 Mandaeans at great risk of harm by both the situation and the extremists in Syria.

This is an utterly urgent situation that should be taken very seriously and to be acted upon by the UN, and the governments of the USA, AUSTRALIA, IRAQ and the Governments of the E.U.

As all concerned are aware that the Mandaeans were and still refugees in Syria escaped from Iraq as their persecution reached the 4th stage of genocide – please refer to our reports 2008-2009- they stuck there now as the security situation is getting worse. The Mandaean refugees are at a very serious risk of harm as they could be victimised by any of the fighting factions within the country.

The refugees cannot go back to Iraq

The refugees cannot go back to Iraq, they would risk their life for sure. We notice that confirmation in the UNHCR report released May 2012 [HCR/EG/IRQ/12/03] *page 29

“Most religious leaders have either been killed or fled the country. Eight Sabaeen Mandaeans were reportedly killed and five injured in 2010 in what were reported to be targeted attacks. In 2011, additional kidnappings and killings were reported by the Mandaean Association Union. Sabaeen-Mandaeans goldsmiths reportedly continued to receive threats and suffer from attacks. Even in cases of kidnapping for ransom, the perpetrators may deliberately single out Sabaeen-Mandaeans due to their vulnerable status as religious minority, considered ‘infidel’. There have been reports of kidnapped Sabaeen-Mandaeans killed or remaining missing despite the payment of ransom. In addition to targeted violence perpetrated against Sabaeen-Mandaeans the community has also suffered from social marginalization and religious discrimination. There are no schools in southern and central Iraq that teach children their language Aramaic, and children are obliged to undertake Qur’anic studies at public schools. Sabaeen-mandaean women are pressured to observe the Higab in public in order to avoid physical and verbal abuse, although their religion does not require veiling. Reportedly, Sabaeen-Mandaean women have been pressured to marry outside their faith in contradiction with their religious customs and have been pressured to convert to Islam.

Also mentioned on the same page “Sabaeen-Mandaeans are particularly vulnerable to attacks for several reasons. Unlike other groups in Iraq the pacifist Mandaeans did not form militias to defend themselves. Further the already small community lives in scattered groups.

The above situation is still the same in Iraq taking into consideration that the number of the Sabaeen-Mandaeans who chose to stay are 10% of the total number of Mandaeans all over the world nearly 70000.

Atrocities against the mandaeans in Iraq since September 2011.

- It was noticeable that the atrocities were taking cyclical pattern as if it is a process of reminding the community, no doubt the main product of this is the terror and fear rooted in the people living in Iraq, also it was noticeable that it took place in different areas of the country and in different forms
- 1- Fawzy Jabbar Mutar Al Zuhairy was kidnapped on December 2011 ,his body was discovered on March 2012 in a cemetery in Karbala province.
 - 2- Miss Randa Kareem Jabbar was kidnapped on June 10th –2012 in Arbeel – Kurdistan she is still missing.
 - 3- Religious man Basheer Hameed Al Zuhairy had his house attacked on June 23rd 2012 in Messan province by gun men who terrorise him and his family by random shooting.
 - 4- Salam Mohy Sahar received threats from unknown group in Baghdad ,and was asked to leave within 3 days or his wife would be kidnapped , his widowed sister Hadiya with her 3 children also was attacked and her daughter sustained knife injury.
 - 5- In Basra Abdull Hasan Ghanim was attacked his daughter sustained broken arm they left to Syria.
 - 6- A Mandaean lady Malahim Diya'a Hasab kidnapped with her two children (born 2000 & 2004) on August 25th 2012 from Palestine camp in Syria , released after negotiation and paying ransom to abductees

In Iraq, The mandaeans are still sometimes treated as third class citizens and called infidels with social discrimination in different areas of the country . Their work opportunities are limited in the governmental sector, hence large number are self-employed in the goldsmith trade but not without problems. On the 7th of December 2012, in one of the main Jewellery streets –Al Naher – where traditionally the mandaeans gold smiths based, though their number reduced to less than tenth of the original, the police rounded them and took large numbers to the local police station treated badly and were accused of smuggling gold without any proof or evidence,. Bribes were asked as condition of release.

The children are forced to learn Quran or participate in the Shiet Islamic rituals related to Moharram.

In the report Regional Response Plan Iraqi Refugees* 2012 by the UNHCR , states at page 5 point iv.

Many Iraqi refugees continue to show little interest in returning to Iraq. While resettlement will continue to be used as protection tool throughout the region, and as a burden-sharing mechanism that demonstrate international solidarity with host countries , agencies acknowledge that this solution will gradually diminish as resettlement countries reduce their limited quotas''

It is obvious that for the mandaeans there are no other choices if the general refugees mixture from Iraq show such reluctance, to the Mandaeans this is rather an obligations taking the details of their persecution, and it seems somehow that the 460 refugees who were not allocated to resettlement were not assessed with consideration their specific belonging to the persecuted minority of the Mandaeans.

The situation of the refugees in Syria

Most of mandaeans lives in Germanah area within Damascus that area now involved with the sectarian fighting and it is dangerous .The international agencies left the country so they do not know about the future of their cases as refugees, in addition to the facts stated above they also will lose their status as being on the resettlement program if they return to Iraq and that is a very big dilemma to them .

The Syrian red crescent closed many of its offices which were serving some needs of the refugees, the UNHCR offices reduced its functions and as for the funds given they are limited and cannot

match the increase in the prices ,they will give few months funds to the refugees who are capable of reaching them .

The UNHCR In its report Iraq 2012 Regional Response Plan* issued 2011 state page 37

An average of 108,500 refugees received regular food rations throughout 2011 .Since September 2011 all refugees have received this assistance through the Electronic Voucher System [EVS] which gradually replaced in-kind food rations .

This shows how dependent is the refugee on the support of the agencies for food same apply to the health and education as pointed out in the same report ,the disruption of such support is very serious to the Mandaean refugees .

The MHRG records show that in 26/2/2012 there were 2830 individuals lives in Syria all registered with the UNHCR as refugees ,Only 460 or so individuals were not allocated resettlement , neither their applications were processed. The majority of this group came to Syria since 2010 indicating the continuous flow of the refugees from Iraq. That means there are 2380 individuals are on the resettlement program to a third country ,by definition that meant that they are not able to go back to Iraq and that they should be travelling to another accepting country . As such it is unbelievable that the 460 other individuals will not be allocated to the resettlement program as that does not make logic since despite that the processing is done on individual cases ,statistically that is puzzling taking in consideration the total number of mandaeans been resettled to other countries since 2003 ,this fact needs an urgent review from all authorities.

*** Looking at the periodical report of the UNHCR SYRIA * JUNE 2012 The total number of the Iraqi refugees registered with the UNHCR Syria is 87,741** ,so the Mandaean will make at May 2012 - 3.2% of the total refugees in Syria at the same time these refugees are making 20% of the total population of the community in the middle east . The MHRG really wonder as how the case of this religious, ethnic minority and as indigenous people of Iraq who were and still subjected to ethnic cleansing and genocide were treated by the international community and the UNHCR. All of this despite the continuous efforts of the MHRG and its allies in informing and presenting our documented plight to the international community , the governmental institutes concerned with the refugees and the UN via frequent meetings with the UNHCR offices directly and periodically in Geneva .

- In Jordan there are around 400 individuals all on the resettlement program and they are waiting ,in Yemen there is one family of 6 also on the resettlement program ,some are in other countries.
- The UNHCR in its report UNHCR Iraq Operation Monthly Statistical Update on Return – may 2012 points out page 3/12 that the distribution of the Iraqi refugees are 59% in Syria and 19% in Jordan ,this is a close reflexion of the currant distribution of the refugees within the mandaean community but that balance came only after the deterioration of the security status in Syria as in 2011 there were only 30 individual ,in the same report it mentioned that the returnees in 2003 – 2012 were 36,640 this will make statistically significant number out of the total number of refugees ,but that was not applicable to the mandaeans but exactly the opposite where the number of the new refugees in 2010,2011.2012 were on the increase, as such the refugees statistics of the Mandaean are unique in reflection of persecution and fear due to the cyclical atrocities against them during that period.
- The Refugee Studies Centre ,Oxford Department of International Development ,University of Oxford in its Workshop report dated 22 March 2012 , Amman titled = Iraqi protracted displacement [in association with NRC the Norwegian Refugee Council and IDMC International Displacement Monitoring Centre]

states on page 4 *According to UNHCR Syria some 42400 Iraqis had their files inactivated since 2011 indicating that some refugees are returning without UNHCR assistance. This raises questions about the 'voluntariness' of the process.*

In relation to the Mandaeans that was not applicable even within that context , the MHRG records show that in 5.12.12 the number of the refugees despite the serious conditions in Syria is 1784 after and during that period 121 were travelled to the USA on the resettlement program , 251 refugees arrived to other countries like Germany ,Canada ,Australia ,ETC both legally via the resettlement program and illegally . 607 of them fled to other countries like Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia and Indonesia, some tried to travel by boats to Australia and many missing with one refugee at Youmora refugee camp.

They are making double refugee status this is the even more dangerous situation for a community faced in its struggle to survive.

Sub classifications of the status of the refugees as on the 5th – December 2012-12-08

- Waiting for USA visa - or travel permission files = 69 total number = 229
- Refugees who were rejected for resettlement files= 136 total number =460
- Refugees waiting for USA and Australia team interview files=283 total number = 897
- Refugees accepted to Canada Australia and other countries Files=77 total number 198

The same report state page –4

Third country resettlement is perceived by many refugees as an uneven, unpredictable and inaccessible process. Many of the traditional resettlement countries are no longer processing large numbers of claims from Iraqis. In particular the strict US scrutiny process and the 'Fortress Europe' mentality and related policies have resulted in the continuous reduction of resettlement cases [e.g. according to the UNHCR in Syria the number of submissions fell from 60,700 in 2010 to 8,350 in 2011]

If this is the general situation of the refugees we would imagine that the impact on the Mandaeans refugees would be reflected with disastrous consequences on their community as per percentage.

In its report UNHCR Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2013 Section North Africa and Middle East page 51 states

'Almost 20,000 Iraqi refugees in the resettlement processing pipeline were essentially stranded when deteriorating diplomatic relations between the Syria Arab Republic and some resettlement countries resulted in the latter's inability by to send interviewing selection missions''

One of the consequences of above on our Mandaean community is also reflected in the report [Refugee Study Centre] on page 7 we read

'What is known already is that given the limited movement opportunities through resettlement ,many use illegal migration channels. Opening up traditional migration channels to those who may not benefit from resettlement could be a safe and sustainable strategy to address situations of prolonged exile on a larger scale''

One must point out that the normal channels to be opened are similar to the P2 priority granted to the Iranian Mandaeans in 2004, this may apply to the Iraqi Mandaeans refugees who were not granted the resettlement program.

In report dated 5th June 2012 ,EC/63/SC/CRP.12 – Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Program – standing committee 54th meeting on page 3 point IV -9- we read

'The vital role resettlement can play in response to emergency refugee situations was clearly demonstrated in the context of the Libya crisis in 2011''

Then point 10- *“ In response to the initiative twelve resettlement countries offered some 1,700 dedicated resettlement places” in the same section “at meeting of the annual tripartite consultation on resettlement ,working group resettlement [ATCR/WGR]IN 2011 UNHCR proposed piloting a pool of emergency resettlement places, to be set aside specifically for large scale emergency resettlement on an annual basis” ,*

Our point cant the above be applied to the 460 individuals of the Mandaean refugees as this bulk by its self-represent nearly 5% of the total population out of the 20% total percentage of the population as refugees rejected.

Hence many of our refugees while they are waiting for so long many years in many cases they fell victims to smugglers of all sorts risking their lives some stranded in many African countries some were arrested in some far Asia countries and some were victims of the famous Australian boats ,some died and some missing.

To our dismay we notice that few Governments are rejecting the asylum applications of many mandaeans refugees despite the fact that they were allocated status of refugees by the UNHCR in Syria and some were on the resettlement program .

WE ARE THE WEAKEST GROUP

We ought to point out that the Mandaean as a community are the weakest group within Iraq and outside Iraq ,such issues must be taken in consideration this is a practical political and social issue while the refugees account for 20% of its population in the middle east the mandaeans are still subjected to continues harassment and discrimination and cyclical atrocities ,the refugees in the other Arab countries are by definition refugees who live on the remaining of their savings and the UNHCR help . Some minute amount of money comes to the refugees from the community outside these countries but it is limited and cannot support many other needs ,the organisations which help in the work in general like the MHRG its self is self-funded time and money by professional volunteers hence the limitation of its outreach influence, there is no support what so ever that comes from other organization or countries as they are not affiliated to any of them in any form ,the same applies to the Mandaean Associations Union (MAU),

Conclusions and requests

- 1- The Situation of Mandaean in Iraq is still very fragile and continuation of the same policies that led the majority to escape is still unopposed. Continuous pressure on the Iraqi government is needed to enforce safety and respect of human dignity and religious freedom
- 2- The MHRG hopes that the all concerned must act immediately and very urgently to save the Mandaean refugees in Syria
- 3- The UNHCR ought to arrange for the refugees to be allocated to other places and to be allowed to continue processing their resettlement s to other countries from there
- 4- The mandaeans refugees who are currently in Syria awaiting final settlement in third countries of asylum and may have again to relocate mean time to a neighbouring country for safety will be more assured if the UNHCR issue a written statement to honour and support its promises of moving the refugees files with them and insure a continuity of process rather than starting from the beginning again.
- 5- The UNHCR can and should ask the regional Governments of Iraq or Kurdistan of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey to support those refugees with all forms of support including the appropriate housing.
- 6- US, the Australian government and other EU governments should look into urgent processing of these cases and using interview centres in Kurdistan or even Baghdad to process these cases.