

Access to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) services
UNHCR Evidence taken by Representatives of the Independent Review

Introduction

Since 2015 concerns have been raised about the ability of persecuted Christians to obtain help through the UNHCR. Reports range from claims that the Christians are “grossly underrepresented” in UNHCR facilities¹ to allegations that the United Nations itself has an “apparent disregard for Christian lives”². These and similar claims extend well beyond news reports and opinion pieces. Alarming evidence surrounding UNHCR provision to Christian refugees has been laid before the Helsinki Commission³ and the United States House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee⁴ among others, and so a brief examination is warranted.

On the specific issue of UNHCR provision to Christians, the Review received two first-hand accounts from Iraq, four from Jordan, two from Lebanon, one from Indonesia, and two from Greece. In addition to these, testimonies from NGO figures on the ground in Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka were presented. This evidence supplements statements given to the Review by numerous NGOs and Church based organisations — both local and international, dating from 2015 to present.

Broadly, the evidence falls into two categories: claims that the UNHCR has failed to make their facilities safe and accessible for Christians, and claims that the UNHCR prioritises other minority groups over Christians.

Representatives of the Review met with the UNHCR to discuss these issues. The substantive outcome of the meeting is reflected in the notes below.

No systematic survey of Christian refugees in the Middle East and North Africa region or elsewhere has been undertaken, and so it is not possible to test these claims against a body of quantitative evidence. Yet it is the opinion of the Reviewers that these accounts are too numerous, originating from too diverse a range of sources to be dismissed as isolated, and must be taken seriously. For this reason, answers to specific questions were solicited from the UNHCR.

In their response UNHCR admitted critical shortcomings owing to chronic lack of sufficient funding and the scale of crises they have had to confront, but strongly rejected any accusation of partiality or discrimination. They have asked to be informed of any instances of alleged discrimination so they can investigate them.

In response to questions about the proportion of Iraqi Christians resettled, they said: -

“During the last 10 years, UNHCR has referred 72,700 Syrian and Iraqi Christians for resettlement....Since 2013, of all Iraqi refugees submitted for resettlement to the US, 36% were Christians. Iraqi Christians have been referred for resettlement at a much higher percentage (36%) than their percentage in the refugee population (approximately 15%)”

In response to claims that they had failed to make their facilities sufficiently safe for Christians, they said *“UNHCR would never wilfully foster or tolerate an environment where Christians or other minorities feel*

¹ Barnabas Fund, *UK Home office finally admits reason for underrepresentation of Christian refugees* 5 December 2018 <https://barnabasfund.org/en/news/uk-home-office-finally-admits-reason-for-underrepresentation-of-christian-refugees>

² Document, *Discrimination against Christian Refugees*, Judith Bergman August 6, 2018: <https://www.document.no/2018/08/07/uk-discrimination-against-christian-refugees/>

³ Evidence of Mr Steve Rasche given at A Hearing Before the Helsinki Commission Thursday, September 22, 2016: https://www.csce.gov/sites/helsinkicommission.house.gov/files/3_Steve%20Rasche_Testimony.pdf

⁴ Testimony of Mr. Carl A. Anderson Supreme Knight Knights of Columbus Before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations of the House Foreign Affairs Committee At a hearing titled Fulfilling the Humanitarian Imperative: Assisting Victims of ISIS Violence, December 9, 2015: <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA16/20151209/104273/HHRG-114-FA16-Wstate-AndersonC-20151209.pdf>

threatened approaching us.” though, in the same response they clarified that they have no systematic data on violent attacks against Christians within their facilities.

Regarding the proportion of Christians within camps, UNHCR revealed that *“In Jordan, there are no Christians residing in the two camps run by UNHCR”* but were at pains to provide context to this statement, emphasising that most refugees (around 92%) reside outside of camps, and that this ought to be viewed as a success, given the possible negative consequences of camp living.

A further criticism of the UNHCR approach received in evidence was that they do not take sufficient account of religion in the administration of their services. This has been summarised in submissions to the Review as the doctrine of *“need, not creed”*. Critics of this approach argue that religion can often be integral to providing effective protection and referral services. Examples received in evidence include UNHCR registered Christians who were told to reside in areas where religious intolerance was a known issue, and where they suffered discrimination and even violent attacks. In one case, a family member was raped inside a camp which the family maintains would not have happened had they not been Christian. The UNHCR responded to this by saying *“In this example. UNHCR was not provided with the place or context, and therefore is unable to comment. We would obviously facilitate an inquiry into such allegations, which should be referred to the responsible local/national authorities.”*

UNHCR, however, nuances the *“need, not creed”* approach. While they are immovable in their defence of a needs based and non-discriminatory way of working, they add that *“...religious beliefs can cause, or heighten, the risk a refugee faces while in displacement. If a refugee is faced with discrimination or intimidation, UNHCR assesses how this affects the overall situation and well-being of a refugee in order to tailor an appropriate response, which may include financial assistance, referral for specialized services or referral for resettlement. This has resulted in a larger percentage of resettlement of referrals of Christians (and other religious minorities) relative to their percentage in the general population.”*

END

Conclusion

Evidence is insufficient to claim that Christians have not enjoyed access to UNHCR services proportionate to their need. Yet it is hard to believe that not a single Christian refugee in Jordan needs and desires to live within a UNHCR facility. It is clear that more can be done to help Christians overcome any obstacles (cultural or otherwise) to availing themselves of UNHCR help that they need and for which they are eligible. Equally, where need and religion closely intersect - as so often in contemporary refugee crises - relevant indicators should be developed to assist those charged with the care of minorities to ensure that those who are more vulnerable because of their religion are appropriately protected. Given the close cooperation between the UNHCR and the FCO, and particularly in light of the UNHCR's use of FCO country assessments, this is an issue in which the FCO can and should play a leading role, including assisting in researching minority access to services.