

DR. CAROLINE LUCAS

Green Party  
*for the South East of England*

Dr Kim Howells  
Minister of State  
Foreign and Commonwealth Office  
King Charles Street  
London SW1A 2AH

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Dear Kim,

I would like to take this opportunity to express concern about the current threat to religious freedom in Iraq and urge you to make this and other human rights issues a priority for your work in the country.

As I am sure you are fully aware, Christians in Iraq are being particularly targeted and persecuted because of their association with the Western occupying powers. For example, there are reports of priests being ordered to remove their crosses and not ring church bells, or face personal attack and arson for failing to co-operate. In 2004 six churches were simultaneously bombed whilst worshippers prayed inside, marking the start of concerted campaign against priests, nuns and lay Christians. This violence seems to have been concentrated in Baghdad, with some attacks in Mosul and Basra. Earlier this year, for example, Christian families were expelled from the Dora region of the capital, and churches, monasteries and convents were forced to shut down. However, across Iraq the secular freedoms of Iraqi citizens, in particular women, are being systematically destroyed, with women of all religious backgrounds, including Christians, being ordered to cover up according to strict Shari'a law.

According to some estimates, more than half the Christian population of Baghdad has now fled, with Syria, Jordan and the Kurdish regions to the North of Iraq taking in many refugees. Others Iraqis are fleeing because their secular lifestyle is under threat or because they fear speaking out against tribal militias. Whilst we may have become accustomed to hearing endless news of kidnappings, murders and attacks, it is vital that we do not become desensitised to the terrible human rights violations occurring on a daily basis in Iraq - be they abuses against freedom of religious expression, freedom of speech, freedom of political expression or otherwise.

The ongoing presence of occupying forces in Iraq is undoubtedly a factor in the current crisis, although I appreciate that any comments about this aspect of government policy is probably best addressed elsewhere. However, I do believe that the United Nations can play a role in facilitating understanding of, and respect for, human rights in Iraq and urge the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to do its utmost to promote such work.

Many thanks for your time and I look forward to hearing your thoughts on this matter.

Yours sincerely,



Caroline Lucas - Green Party MEP for South East England.