

Statement of Dr. Donny George
for the
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

I, Donny George Youkhanna, confirm that I am a citizen of Iraq, I was born in Habania, Anbar province, in Iraq, on the day of twenty third of the month of October in the year of nineteen hundred and fifty, I am an Assyrian Christian, and all my ancestors had lived in Mesopotamia, now Iraq, from the ancient times of the Assyrians, more that five thousands years ago, I have dedicated all my life to work and serve my people and country with honor and loyalty, because this is my country.

I had all my education in Iraq, my higher education in the University of Baghdad, BA, MA, and PhD, and I am a specialist in Mesopotamian Archaeology.

During Saddam Hussein's time I have worked in the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, from 1976 until I left the country in 2006. Before the war of 2003, we were unofficially considered second class citizens, simply because we were Christians and Assyrians, Saddam did big efforts to omit our identity as Christians and as Assyrians, he started a campaign of re-righting the history of Iraq in the way he vision, and he started calling the ancient Assyrian as Arabs, no more Assyrians, he also set up orders that new born Christian babies should not be named Christian or Assyrian names but Arab Muslim names, and all of us had really big troubles about that, because our names are an important part of our identity. Although the Assyrian Christians had the highest percentage of educated people in Iraq, we had the lowest percentage of high positions in the government, and of course when for the first time in the late seventies of the last century, we had young Assyrians demanding for our political rights, they were captured, tortured, and then executed.

After the Americans toppled Saddams power in April 2003, every body started breathing the freedom and waiting for democracy to start and every one as an Iraqi should have his rights. But the infiltration of people coming from the countries surrounding Iraq made it impossible to start the real process of improving the situation in the country, besides fighting each other, the Sunnis and Shias, a large champagne started against the Christians, at home, my parents place in Dora, we started hearing that the Muslim extremists will do to the Christians exactly what they did to the Jewish in 1948, this meant complete cleansing of the people from the county, and because of that we received a letter in an envelope together with bullet of a Kalashnikov, the letter threatened my younger son, Martin, and accusing him of cursing Islam and teasing Muslim girls, and they mentioned that they suspect that his father, my self, works with the Americans, so he was ordered to write a letter of apologize for them, (the brigades of martyr Zarqawi), and a fine of one thousand US dollars, to be put in an envelope and dropped in a certain place in Dora, otherwise, the next day he will be kidnapped and beheaded immediately, when I heard that I asked my elder son to get them all, my mother, my two sisters and Martin and bring them to our flat in another part of

Baghdad, and in the afternoon I arranged for the letter and the money to be dropped for them, so that they will not come after my son. In the coming few days, I heard that the same thing had happened to 12 Christian families in the same area of Dora, same kind of letter and the same kind of accusations, they all paid and left the area, leaving everything behind, houses, properties, now Dora is completely empty of any Christian Assyrians, and almost all the churches there had been bombed and burnt.

After I had my family all together in our flat, I arranged to send them to Damascus, Syria, to be safe of that deadly threat.

On the other hand, in November 2003, I became the director general of the Iraqi Museums, and in August 2005, I became the chairman of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage in Iraq, after thirty years of service in all the fields of antiquities. But the problems started when the new ministry of tourism and antiquities was created to control the antiquities service, literary speaking when that ministry was controlled by the people coming from the religious party controlled by Al-Sader, when the ministry people started interfering in my job and specialty, whom they knew nothing, and then all my authorities as the chairman of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage were withdrawn by the minister himself, this meant complete paralyze of my duties, and finally, I was told by some people in the same ministry that the order had come from their party that Donny should not stay in his position because he is a Christian, and such an important institution should not be headed by a Christian. When I learned all that I decided to quit my job and to apply for retirement, when I sent my request to the minister, in two hours I received the answer that he had signed my request and approved it, for me this meant clearly that he was waiting for that letter and never asked anything about it.

After one week, I managed to arrange everything and traveled to Damascus with my wife and my daughter, whom we were the last three of the family to leave. In Damascus we stayed for four months during which I was offered a chance of a visiting professor in the State University of New York at Stony Brook, but I still have my mother and my two sisters in Damascus.

What had happened to me and my family in Iraq is the story of every single Assyrian Christian family there, or some times even worst than that, they have been kidnapped, killed, persecuted, raped, it is an ongoing tragedy and genocide for the Assyrian Christian people in Iraq.

And now the only place these families can go, depending on their abilities, is either going up to the north in Nineveh plain, or, for those who have a better chance to move outside the country, to Syria or Jordan.

Now why going to the "Nineveh Plain" historically speaking, the Assyrians belong in to this Nineveh plain, we come originally from there, in the books of history and archaeology it is called "The Assyrian Triangle", our ancient major cities are there Nineveh, Nimrud, Khorsabad, and even the city of Ashur, our original towns and villages are there too, we've come down from these towns and villages in to the major cities of Iraq, Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, and

Basrah, and it is just natural when we feel in danger, we would go back to our original area.

Another important historical fact is, that the Assyrians are the first people that converted to Christianity, in the beginning of the first century AD, by the hands of Saint Tomas, simply because they were civilized and educated people, so they understood Christianity immediately, and now, these people are rewarded for that by, persecuting, kidnapping, raping, and killing.

Again in the history, the Christians being the elite people during the Abbasid Khalifat period, around one thousand years ago, played a vital role in being the mediators by presenting the European culture to the Arabs and vice versa, and they have been doing the same role during the modern history of Iraq and again since 2003.

And now what is needed from the US Government, we need four essential steps to keep the remaining minority in Iraq and possible draw those who have left to return, they are:

1. Push forward funds for internally Displaced Persons in the north (House of representative has passed a \$10 million of funds, no action yet by the Senate).
2. Press in a sustained and determined effort the Kurdish Regional Government to end all practices that marginalize and discriminate against Christians and non-Kurds.
3. Provide, on an urgent basis, minimal infrastructure and amenities to Nineveh plain to allow the smallest minorities to support themselves in their ancestral areas.
4. Convene the civic representatives of the Iraqi minority communities to forge a consensus regarding the political status of the Nineveh Plains territory, for example by forming an autonomous administration district as provided for in article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution.

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