Mosul: Iraqi Religious Leaders Fear War

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I visited Mosul in Northern Iraq on Jan. 3 and 4 as a member of the Iraq Peace Team (www.iraqpeaceteam.org). We spent our time in Mosul visiting churches and mosques, chatting with shopkeepers, and savoring the ancient feel of a city that has been inhabited since its name Ninevah and God told Jonah to go preach to the people there.

Northern Iraq is a beautiful place, and I feel privileged to have visited there and met so many wonderful people. I also found it a very sad place to visit. After 12 years of United Nations/U.S. sanctions, many people in Mosul spend their time worrying about where their next meal will come from.

A greater worry, especially now, is that U.S. bombs will begin falling on this vibrant city as they often do on the surrounding hillside villages. Saying goodbye to the people I met in Mosul was the hardest thing for me. I don't know if they will still be alive when I make a return visit.

Just like in Baghdad, Muslims and Christians in Mosul north of Iraq have lived in harmony for hundreds and hundreds of years. The mosque next door to Sister Shereen's convent. Several members of the five families who were taken to refugee were killed. The church has recently been rebuilt.

Although Bush's aids quickly had him apologize for the remark, Father Akhmed said the damage was already done. Many Muslims here already perceived U.S. aggression as anti-Islamic, and Bush's remark just confirmed that suspicion.

Christian sit on the seven-member Revolutionary Council. The current government provides security guards for minority Shi'ite pilgrimage sites and ETA groups. Baghdad's 2,500 Jewish residents also enjoy special protection. Minority Shi'ite mosques are increasingly attended throughout the country.

"I hope in your visit to Iraq you have discovered that Islam-like all religions-is a religion of love and peace. No religion teaches people to kill other people," said Dr. Ali Abuteebu, a representative for the Sufi Muslim leader Ali Sheikh Muhammad Abdul Khareem. Sipping on a glass of sweet Iraqi tea, he continued, "It is more difficult to build than destroy. By killing our people and destroying our buildings America does not show that it is strong. Why don't the Americans build the people of Iraq by sending medicines and food and by participating in our economy?"

The sound of air raid sirens in Mosul is a normal, almost everyday experience according to Sister Shereen, a Dominican nun. The bombing that often follows the sirens is what people struggle to deal with.

"It is our job in the church to help take this pain from our people, but how can we?" she told me, speaking of what she describes as "deep psychological pain" that comes from the loss of life as well as the fear of American bombings around Mosul.

During the Gulf War, a U.S. plane dropped a bomb on the church next door to Sister Shereen convent. Several members of the five families who were taken to refugee were killed. The church has recently been rebuilt.

Some analysts say that U.S. military is getting increasingly aggressive in its bombing campaigns in the no-fly-zones, especially in the South, but also in the North near Mosul. Some analysts say that U.S. fighter pilots have been ordered to take more risks, by being given lower flight plans and stepping up attacks on more controversial targets. Some conjecture that military planners hope to provoke an incident, such as a U.S. plane getting shot down, as an excuse to begin a full-scale invasion.

This is an immoral and dangerous strategy for many reasons. For one, it puts U.S. pilots at great risk of being shot down by Iraqi anti-aircraft fire. Furthermore, the bombing of Iraqi military targets puts nearby civilians and civilian infrastructure at risk. On Jan. 1, the AFP news service reported on three bombings in which civilian targets were blown-up. After a long talk and many strong coffees, Sister Shereen and Father Akhmed sent our group off with a song. They chanted the Lord's Prayer in their native language: Aramaic. Iraq is home to the world's largest population of native speakers of the language Jesus spoke, with some 300,000 Aramaic-speaking Christians living mostly in and around Mosul.

"Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass on us."