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BAGHDAD, 30 January (IRIN) - Five simultaneous bomb attacks on 29 January that appeared to target churches and the Vatican embassy have raised concerns among Iraqi Christians about rising sectarian tensions.

In the wake of the bombs which exploded outside two churches in Kirkuk, two in the capital Baghdad, as well as the Vatican embassy, killing 16 and injuring 20, Christian families are reportedly leaving the country in fear of more violence.

"We've heard of dozens of families preparing to leave Iraq, afraid of more attacks," said Farah Annuar, spokesman for the Christian Organisation of Iraq.

Christians make up about three percent of the population, or an estimated 800,000 people, according to a 2005 census. Kirkuk is home to the second biggest Christian community after Baghdad.

"I don't want to lose my children due to political problems," said Rita Paolo, a mother of two, as she made preparations to leave. "I will take them to Jordan to live far away from this discrimination and anger."

Taxi drivers specialised in ferrying passengers to Jordan and Syria reported that nearly all reservations made within the last 24 hours were from Christian families seeking to leave the country.

"More than 20 Christian families have booked our services until next Friday," said Yaub Haki, owner of a taxi company in the capital's Mansour district. "This normally happens only during the holidays. Usually we have only one or two families per month."

On Monday, 400 local Christian clerics demonstrated in Baghdad against the violence. Many protestors opined that the targeting of Christian institutions was a direct result of foreign occupation.

"Christians are being forced to leave Iraq after years of peace," said Fr. Ismael Kardush, an Orthodox Christian cleric participating in the demonstration. "They can't target the Americans, so they target us for having the same religion, even if we're fellow Arabs."

"The government should do something to protect us," Kardush added.

The latest bombing is not the first time that attacks appeared to target areas associated with the Christian community. In August 2004, at least 12 people were killed and dozens injured in a spate of bombings that targeted Christians in Baghdad and Mosul.

According to local organisations, about 150,000 Christians are believed to have left the country since the US occupation began in 2003.

"Every day, we try to help our Christian brothers leave Iraq for different destinations," said Annuar, "especially for countries offering sanctuary to refugees".

"But after the last incident, I think we have lost our country, and the best thing to do is to leave it," he added.