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SYRIA | Conflicting Reports Concerning Missing Nuns

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is concerned for the welfare of 12 nuns and three young women who were taken away from their convent in a village 37 miles north of the Syrian capital Damascus by Islamist rebels on Dec. 2.

There are conflicting accounts on the current plight of the nuns and their three associates. Pope Francis has called for prayer for “the nuns of the Greek Orthodox convent of St. Takla of Maaloula in Syria who were forcibly taken away by armed men two days ago.” On Dec. 3, their mother superior, Pelagia Sayyaf, said the women were “comfortably installed in a house in Yabrud, and no one was bothering them.”

Thousands of Christians and many Muslims fled Maaloula when it was invaded on Sept. 5 by Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Islamist militia, including the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabat al-Nusra. Christian families who escaped were accommodated by churches in the Damascus area, which provided food and medical supplies. However, 40 nuns remained in Maaloula to look after dozens of orphaned children.

Maaloula is a UNESCO world heritage site and one of the few places in the world where the locals still speak Aramaic. According to Syrian news agency SANA, the rebels "committed acts of vandalism in the town's neighborhoods and around the convent, attacking locals and targeting them with sniper fire."

CSW remains concerned by the disappearance of Archbishop Boulos (Paul) Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church and Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Church, who were abducted by gunmen in April 2013 as they returned from a humanitarian mission near the Syria/Turkey border. Their whereabouts remain unknown.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the Syrian civil war has claimed at least 125,835 lives, with five million people internally displaced, and two million Syrians fleeing to other countries. The seven million affected represent a third of Syria's population.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “Our thoughts and prayers are very much with the nuns and the three young women in their entourage, particularly in light of conflicting reports regarding whether they were forcibly abducted or evacuated to safety. These are worrying times for the Christian community in Syria, given the earlier abductions of two Archbishops and the documented and deliberate targeting of clergy and laity by Islamist militia. CSW urges every party to the conflict to adhere to humanitarian standards with regard to the treatment of civilians, religious leaders and religious establishments, regardless of creed or ethnicity. We also request the speedy release of these nuns and their associates into the hands of church authorities.”

