



3.10.14

SYRIA | Abducted Maaloula Nuns Released in Prisoner Exchange

Thirteen Greek Orthodox nuns and their three helpers, who had been held by Syrian rebel forces since December 2013, were released in exchange for female prisoners held by the Syrian regime.

Lebanese state media reported the women had been taken overnight on a nine-hour journey to the town of Judayat Yabus on the Syrian-Lebanon border where they were released.

Lebanon's security chief, General Abbas Ibrahim, who was responsible for the prisoner exchange, stated approximately 150 female prisoners were to be released in exchange for the nuns' freedom.

Mother Superior Pelagia Sayyaf, head of Maaloula convent, told a press conference, "God did not leave us. The (Nusra) Front was good to us...but we took off our crosses because we were in the wrong place to wear them." The group of mainly Syrian and Lebanese nuns has been held since December 2013, when forces from Jabat Al-Nusra and other jihadi militias overran the ancient Christian town of Maaloula and abducted the women from the Mar Takla Greek Orthodox Convent. Reports indicate the group was subsequently taken to the town of Yabroud, a rebel stronghold which is currently the target of heavy government bombardment.

Christians have been increasingly targeted by Islamist jihadi groups, including in the Christian city of Sadad last November, where 45 were reportedly killed. Last month, Christians in the town of al-Raqa were ordered by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) to pay a 'jizya' tax and to conduct religious services behind closed doors, and Christian community leaders were obliged to sign an agreement to this effect. Despite many Islamic scholars and local Muslim residents decrying this tax, it nevertheless has been implemented and published on several extremist websites.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (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 are still unknown.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are delighted to learn of the release of the nuns and their helpers. We are particularly pleased to hear they were released unharmed and were treated well. CSW continues to call for the release and safe return of Archbishops Boulos (Paul) Yazigi and Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim, who remain missing, and we urge the

Lebanese and Qatari authorities who facilitated the prisoner exchange to use their good offices to secure their release as well."