

## Syrian Orthodox Church has told that 90 per cent of Christians have been expelled from Homs



*Members of the rebel Free Syrian Army in Homs (CNS photo/stringer via Reuters)*

Almost the entire Christian population of the Syrian city of Homs has fled violence and persecution, according to Fides, the news agency of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples.

The mass exodus of 50,000 or more people to villages and towns around the city comes amid reports that the homes of Christians in Homs have been attacked and seized by militants.

The Syrian Orthodox Church has told Fides that 90 per cent of Christians have been expelled amid what it fears is “an ongoing ethnic cleansing”.

Until now, Homs has been home to one of Syria’s largest Christian populations, and Church sources have said the faithful have borne the brunt of the violence, escaping to villages in mountains 30 miles outside the city.

Islamists have reportedly gone from house to house in the Homs' neighbourhoods of Hamidiya and Bustan al-Diwan, forcing Christians to leave without giving them a chance to take their belongings.

According to other reports, Christians have left their homes voluntarily, in effect making way for others to occupy them to shelter from the violence.

Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need today announced an urgent €80,000 aid package providing food and shelter.

The assistance will provide each family with \$60 each month for basic food and lodging, with the hope that by the summer they can return home.

ACN is also helping families caught up in a car bomb explosion last Sunday which targeted the Christian quarter of Aleppo, close to the Franciscan-run Church of St Bonaventure.

Overseeing the aid programme, Bishop Antoine Audo SJ of Aleppo told Aid to the Church in Need: "The people we are helping are very afraid."

Speaking today from Aleppo, the bishop said: "The Christians don't know what their future will hold. They are afraid they will not get their homes back.

"It is very important that we do whatever we can to help the people."

In his application for ACN aid, the bishop stated: "Please speed up the implementation of the project because of the difficult circumstances that Christians face in Syria."

The bishop, who heads Aleppo's Chaldean diocese, paid tribute to ACN benefactors, adding: "Thank you for helping us. Pray for us and let us work together to build peace in Syria."

His comments come as fears grow of Syria becoming a "second Iraq", following a similar pattern of church attacks and forced expulsion and kidnapping of Christians.

If the attacks continue, Syria could suffer the same fate as Iraq where Christians have plummeted from 1.4 million in the late 1980s to perhaps less than 300,000 today.

In both cases, the Church has been targeted for perceived close links with regimes under fire from opposition parties and rebel groups.

The Homs crisis has prompted increased fears that Islamists are gaining influence in the region, filling the power vacuum left when decades-old regimes across the Middle East were overthrown at the start of the so-called Arab Spring.

John Pontifex