



QARAQOSH: Iraqi Christian residents from Qaraqosh (also known as Hamdaniya), some 30 kilometers east of Mosul, take part in a parade as Christians celebrate the first Palm Sunday event in the town since Iraqi forces recaptured it from Islamic State (IS) group jihadists. —AFP

IRAQ'S CHRISTIANS RETURN TO RANSACKED TOWN WITH FEAR

SUNNI MILITANT GRAFFITI REMOVED, SHIITE SLOGANS APPEAR

QARAQOSH: With Islamic State expelled, Iraqi Christians are trickling back to the ransacked town of Qaraqosh, beset by anxiety for their security and yet hopeful they can live in friendship with Muslims of all persuasions. The town, about 20 km from the battlefield with Islamic State in the northern city of Mosul, shows why Christians have mixed feelings about the future of their ancient community. In the desecrated churches of Qaraqosh, Christians are busy removing graffiti daubed by the Sunni Muslim militants during two and a half years of control - only for new slogans to have appeared, scrawled by Shiite members of the Iraqi forces fighting street to street with the jihadists in Mosul.

But nearby a shopkeeper is doing a brisk trade selling Dutch beer, Greek ouzo and several whisky brands to Christians, Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds alike, with this kind of commerce perhaps offering a glimpse of how Iraq's fractured communities could again live together peacefully. Encouraged by security checkpoints and patrols by a volunteer force, up to 10 Christian families have returned to what used to be the minority's biggest community in Iraq until Islamic State seized it in 2014.

Iraqi forces pushed the group out of Qaraqosh in October, part of a six-month offensive to retake Mosul. But residents are worried that the Shiite slogans signal a new kind of sectarian division. "Oh Hussein" is daubed in red on the wall of a church torched earlier by Islamic State, praising the hero of Shiite Muslims who was martyred 1,300 years ago. "We are afraid of this, of tensions," said Girgis Youssif, a church worker. "We want to live in peace and demand security," said Youssif, who returned after fleeing to Erbil, about 60 km away in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Shi'ites in the Iraqi government forces and paramilitary groups, mostly from further

south in the country, have scribbled such slogans on buildings all over Mosul too. Soldiers have also hoisted the flag of Ali in the city and on their on military vehicles. Shiites regard Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed, and the prophet's grandson Hussein as his true successors. Two Shiite flags also fly over Qaraqosh. Most Sunnis, who are the dominant community in Mosul, have shrugged off the Shiite slogans as the work of a handful of religious zealots but Christians take them as a signal that their future remains uncertain. "Of course we are afraid of such signs," said Matti Yashou Hatti, a photographer who still lives in Erbil with his family. "We need international protection."

Those families who have returned to Qaraqosh - once home to 50,000 people - are trying to revive Christian life dating back two millennia. However, most stay only two or three days at a time to refurbish their looted and burnt homes. "We want to come back but there is no water and power," said Mazam Nesin, a Christian who works for a volunteer force based in Qaraqosh but has left his family behind in Erbil. By contrast, displaced Muslims have been flocking back to markets in eastern Mosul since Islamic State's ejection from that part of the city, despite the battle raging in the Old City across the Tigris river which is the militants' last stronghold.

Alcohol shop

Numbers of Christians in Iraq have fallen from 1.5 million to a few hundred thousand since the violence which followed the 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussein. Many Baghdad residents who could not afford to go abroad went to Qaraqosh and other northern towns where security used to be better than in the capital, rocked by sectarian warfare after the US-led invasion.

But with the arrival of Islamic State, residents abandoned their homes with some applying for asylum in Europe. Germany alone took in 130,000 Iraqis, among them many Christians, in 2015 and 2016. But most ended up in Erbil with relatives or in homes paid for by aid agencies. Supermarkets and restaurants remain closed in Qaraqosh, with windows smashed and burnt furniture strewn across floors. One of the few businesses to have reopened is Steve Ibrahim's alcohol shop in the town centre; in the absence of cafes it has become a meeting point for local people. "Business has been good so far. Everybody comes here to stock up," said Ibrahim, who has just reopened the store with his father.

They lost everything when Islamic State, known by its enemies as Daesh, wrecked their business. Now they have invested about \$400 to refurbish the shop - new tiles shine on the walls - and customers are coming from beyond the town and from across the communities. "I sell drinks to Christians and Muslims alike," he said. "Many people come from Mosul or other towns." Many of Ibrahim's customers ignore Islam's forbidding of alcohol consumption. While he was talking, a Sunni Muslim from eastern Mosul drove up to buy a bottle of whisky and four cans of beer, packed in a black plastic bag to hide his purchase from the eyes of more religiously observant Muslims.

"You couldn't drink during Daesh. I am glad this shop is open again," said the man who gave his name only as Mohammed, shaking hands with Christians enjoying an afternoon beer. "I still only drink at home." Later a Shiite from a village south of Mosul arrived to pick up drinks. "I come here twice a week. It's the only shop in the area," he said, asking not to be named, before driving off. —Reuters

IS OUSTER CLEARS THE WAY FOR SOCCER COMEBACK IN MOSUL

MOSUL: It was a grim time for football: Jihadists observed matches, jerseys from foreign teams were banned and even whistling was prohibited when the Islamic State group held Iraq's Mosul. Play was halted for prayers, which occur five times a day, and shorts that exposed players' knees were also banned by IS. Now, eastern Mosul has been recaptured from the jihadists and efforts are underway to rehabilitate football pitches, even as the battle for the city's west continues on the other side of the Tigris River.

"When we were playing, they were watching us and some of them carried weapons, and they prevented us from wearing foreign teams' uniforms," says Osama Ali Hamid, a 26-year-old player wearing the jersey of Germany's Borussia Dortmund club. "If one of us arrived wearing a shirt with the logo of a foreign team, they'd remove the team's logo with scissors," Hamid said. Excitement dominated a recent match in eastern Mosul, at which young men gathered around a pitch that has been covered in new artificial turf to cheer on their comrades. "Now we are playing without Daesh monitoring," says Laith Ali, 23, using an Arabic acronym for IS. "They imposed rules on us." But now, the young men can keep playing even when the call to prayer sounds from the minarets of the city's mosques. Football is wildly popular in Mosul, as it is in other areas across Iraq-indeed, the sport has been one of the few consistent unifiers in a long-divided country.

Battlefields, not playing fields

The Mosul Club was one of the best-known football clubs in the country, and was preparing to return to the Iraqi league in 2014, when IS seized the northern city, preventing the players from going to qualifying matches outside. The club's buildings and facilities are located on the eastern side of Mosul, but the main stadium is in west Mosul, which Iraqi forces are still battling to retake from IS. In 2012, work began to build a new stadium on the same spot with a planned capacity of more than 20,000, but like the Mosul club's Iraqi league aspirations, these plans were also thwarted by the IS assault in 2014.

Mohammed Abdulkarim al-Mimaari, the head of the Youth and Sports Department in Nineveh province, of which Mosul is the capital, says that 12 football pitches in the city have been restored. In Mosul, the department is holding a sports event on the first day of each month, dubbing it "Sports Day," spokesman Omar Shamseddin said. IS members "were playing with us in the beginning, they were treating us well. They are Iraqis from the local community," says player Hamid. But that did not last: they later "began saying in their sermons in the mosques that the battlefields are better than the playing fields". "They even prohibited whistling" during matches based on the belief that it would cause "devils" to gather, says 25-year-old player Mustafah Nour. Violating the prohibition resulted in two or three days in jail, he says. "But now, we play freely," Hamid says. —AFP

BRITISH WOMAN STABBED TO DEATH IN JERUSALEM

JERUSALEM: A 23-year-old British female tourist was stabbed to death in Jerusalem yesterday and her attacker arrested, police said. The attack took place on the tram close to the Old City, where Christian commemorations were under way for Good Friday as Jews marked the week-long Passover holiday. Israel's domestic security agency Shin Bet said the suspected attacker was a 57-year-old Palestinian resident of east Jerusalem. Police had been on high alert for Passover when tens of thousands of Jews pray at the Western Wall inside the Old City and some visit the flashpoint Al-Aqsa mosque compound above it. The compound, which is the third holiest site in Islam and the holiest site to Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount, is the source of constant tensions.

Jews are allowed to visit but not pray at the site. Palestinian fears that Israel will seek to change those rules have been the source of repeated violence. A wave of unrest which erupted in October 2015 has claimed the lives of 260 Palestinians, 41 Israelis, two Americans, one Jordanian, an Eritrean, a Sudanese and a Briton, according to an AFP count. Most of the Palestinians killed were carrying out knife, gun or car-ramming attacks, the Israeli authorities say. Others were shot dead during protests or clashes, while some were killed in Israeli air strikes on the Gaza Strip. The violence has greatly subsided in recent months. —AFP