



The Hon Peter Dutton MP
Minister for Immigration and Border Protection
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12 September 2017

Regarding the Australian Government's consideration of the plight of the Yezidi and Christian minorities in Nineveh, Iraq.

Dear Mr Dutton,

Kurdish Lobby Australia wishes to acknowledge the Australia Government's humane response to ongoing crises in the Middle East, including Australia's increased refugee intake from the region, particularly of persecuted minorities such as the Yezidi. We note how much those already settled in Australian regional centres like Wagga Wagga appreciated your and your wife's attendance at the Yezidi New Year's celebrations earlier this year.

However, thousands of Yezidis, particularly those from Shingal (the Kurdish name for Sinjar), in the Nineveh province of northern Iraq remain internally displaced people (IDPs). As the world has learnt since 2014, these Yezidi are an ancient indigenous people to the region, claiming a religious tradition that is at least 5,000 years old. Although they have attempted to live in peaceful co-existence with other people in the region, over the last 1,400 years they have suffered at least 74 genocide attacks and other forms of persecution because of their refusal to submit to Islam.

Attacks by the forces of Islamic State (ISIS) on the Yezidi people of the Shingal region of Iraq on 3 August 2014 created their present dilemma. The Yezidi people had pleaded for protection from local Peshmerga forces but these were stretched so thin with fighting ISIS elsewhere, and were without US-led coalition support at this stage, so the pleas of the Yezidi went unanswered. Some Sunni community members in the Shingal region even identified their Yezidi neighbours to ISIS terrorists. Two hundred thousand people, including the young, the aged and the infirm, fled to barren Mount Shingal, where they were besieged by ISIS and left to die of hunger, thirst, heat and exhaustion. Had it not been for the forces of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) creating a safe corridor through which 20,000 people were rescued, many more would have lost their lives.

Of the Yezidi men murdered by ISIS, many were beheaded and shot in front of their families, while around 4,670 women and girls were kidnapped, many of whom have been subjected to sex slavery. Of the 1,746 men and boys captured, 1,600 are still held by ISIS. An estimated 1,670 women and girls remain in captivity, while 3,000 have been freed by Kurdish



Peshmerga Forces in Nineveh, Kurdish-led forces in Syria and civilian operators. Some desperate families have paid exorbitant ransoms for the release of their women and girls, while others cannot afford to free their family members.

Most of the rescued Yezidis live in refugee and IDP camps or among host communities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Others remain on Shingal, and have barely survived three snowy winters and summer months of forty to fifty five degree heat. Inside the camps, Yezidi suffer similar weather extremes, leaky tents, inadequate nutrition, ill health and mental illnesses due to trauma, hopelessness, and an ongoing fear of persecution.

Although the Shingal region is almost completely liberated, 75 percent of the region's former residents remain displaced. They cannot return home for many reasons. Many of their homes and businesses, as well as other infrastructure and services have been destroyed. Shingal remains a disputed territory, meaning that both the Kurdish Regional Government and the Government of Iraq dispute over who should govern the region. As a result of this dispute, and ongoing security issues related to the presence of ISIS, and friction between PKK/YPG, Peshmerga forces and the Shi'a Popular Mobilisation Units that arrived in May, as well as threats from Turkey that Turkish security forces will invade Shingal if the Popular Mobilisation units and PKK remain, the potential for military conflict is high. Nor can anyone predict what will happen in Shingal before and after the Kurdistan referendum on independence, due to be held on 25 September 2017.

Of the 550,000 Yezidi in Iraq before ISIS attacked, 360,000 are now IDPs. The rest are either dead (30 mass graves have been found in Shingal so far), staying with relatives and friends in northern Iraq, or have fled to nearby countries like Syria and Turkey, where they are discriminated against. Others have survived the journey to Europe. Some of those wishing to migrate to Australia have registered as refugees with the Australian Embassy in Turkey, but claim they have received no further information from Australian Government representatives in Ankara. Otherwise, with no section for IDPs on Australian immigration application forms, some applications fail, and others will continue to do so.

Kurdish Lobby Australia has suggested to the Australian Government that there is a need to assist the Government of Iraq to initiate reforms that include resolving the status of the disputed territories and providing decentralised, autonomous systems of local and regional government. However, we have yet to learn of any concrete proposals in this regard. If the Australian Government along with the governments of other countries and international organisations cannot make a long term commitment to protect and support the Yezidi people remaining in their homeland, we ask the Australian Government to approve and facilitate the acceptance of Yezidi IDPs and refugees into our country.

The Yezidi people are an industrious, hardy, independent, agriculturally skilled people, who value education. Many have already become well-integrated Australian citizens. Some Australian Yezidi have expressed a preparedness to sponsor Yezidi families from Nineveh in



order to assist them in transitioning into life in Australia. In this respect, some have appealed to us for help.

Some Christians in Nineveh have also informed Kurdish Lobby Australia that they are prepared to contribute their personal finances to the cost of their repatriation and settlement in Australia if accepted as migrants here, rather than spend their savings on dangerous and potentially unsuccessful attempts to travel with people smugglers to Europe. Perhaps government-approved secular, church and other humanitarian organisations could work with these people, many of whom already have English language skills, tertiary qualifications and work experience, but cannot see a future for themselves and their families in Iraq.

At the end of 2016, based on vulnerability, not ethnicity, the Canadian Parliament voted to take Yezidi migrants within 120 days, later setting a target intake number of 1200. The Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) Program in Canada enables Canadian citizens and permanent residents to provide opportunities for refugees settling in Canada. Church and secular organisations that also participate in the program must qualify as Sponsorship Agreement Holders with Citizenship and Immigration Canada. We suggest that this is a model Australia should consider.

Australia's humanitarian migration program is commendable but we believe there is room to do more for people like the Yezidi and other minorities in Iraq. We trust you will carefully consider our request and respond compassionately to the plight of vulnerable minority groups in Nineveh, Iraq.

Yours sincerely,

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