



ASIA/IRAQ - Head of UNICEF: In northern Iraq, a plan of "ethnic and religious cleansing" that affects minorities

Erbil (Agenzia Fides) - The wave of displaced people who fled from Qaraqosh and other Christian villages in the Nineveh Plain under the military pressure of Sunni insurgents led by Islamists of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant has assumed the dimensions of a humanitarian emergency. In Erbil, the capital of the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan, the critical situation has been dealt with by international intervention organisms and initiatives of assistance put in place by Christian communities. "At the moment" explains to Fides Agency Marzio Babilie, head of UNICEF in Iraq "in Erbil alone at least 8 thousand evacuees from the Nineveh Plain have found refuge, and they have been distributed in 19 reception points, largely concentrated in the suburb of Ankawa, mainly inhabited by Christians. The first arrivals appeared literally terrified, after their city had been attacked with mortars. Since the beginning of the emergency UNICEF has assured the distribution of services and basic necessities, and in particular we have set up two centers for children, where our operators take care of more than 700 boys and girls under the age of 7 every day".

According to Babilie, the response to humanitarian emergency in Erbil was prompt and satisfactory also with regards to the coordination between civil institutions and ecclesial communities. According to his point of view, the head of UNICEF in Iraq captures a clear political plan behind the attack of Sunni insurgents and the reaction triggered by it: "The areas attacked" Babilie told Fides, is a plan of "ethnic and religious 'cleansing'. It is not only towards Christians, but also towards the Turkmens who have fled from south-east areas of Iraqi Kurdistan and are also the target of attacks in Kirkuk. There is a risk of not maintaining national cohesion based on the coexistence of different identities. And Christians will be among the first victims of this trend".

In coming days UNICEF will try to reach the area of Sinjar, on the border with Syria, where they are 70 thousand displaced Turkmen, Christians and Shiites who have fled mainly from the district of Tal Afar. "Based on our information" Babilie told Fides "we believe that among those refugees, there could be at least 30 thousand children and young people". (GV) (Agenzia Fides 28/06/2014)