

Primate's Message, March 27, 2014

Prayers for Kessab

My blessings to you all in this holy season of Great Lent.

In recent days, we have all been greatly distressed by the news reports emerging from the region around Kessab, in Syria. At this writing, the Armenian-populated town of Kessab has been invaded by armed rebels affiliated with international terrorist organizations. The attacks—which began on Friday, March 21—are reported to originate from across the border in Turkey (Kessab lies in Syria's northwestern corner, near the Turkish border).

An estimated 670 Armenian Christian families—the majority of Kessab's population—have been evacuated by the local Armenian community, and have taken refuge in the nearby towns of Basit and Latakia. But a number of Kessabtsi Armenian families have remained in their homes, to care for elderly members too old to move.

A counter-offensive by Syrian troops attempted to retake the crossing point at the Syrian-Turkish border on Saturday, March 22; but the armed rebels re-entered Kessab the following day and continue to occupy the town and its surrounding villages. The remaining Armenian residents (estimated at 10 to 15 families) are being held hostage; the local Armenian churches have been desecrated; and local residences and holy places have been shelled and pillaged.

Independent news agencies have identified several notorious international terrorist leaders in videos released by the rebels. The latest reports advise that the rebels seem to be pressing the offensive deeper into Latakia-province (the provincial region in which Kessab is located).

This week the President of the Republic of Armenia, Serge Sargsian, issued a statement denouncing the invasion of Kessab; thanking Syrian authorities for steps being taken to protect the local Armenians; and announcing that Armenia's diplomatic missions at the UN headquarters in New York and Geneva would raise the issue of ensuring the security and safe return of the Kessab Armenians.

His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, also issued a statement condemning the seizure and destruction of Kessab. He expressed solidarity with the local Armenians, and renewed Holy Etchmiadzin's continuing commitment to collect and deliver material aid to Armenians throughout Syria who are caught up in the terrible civil war.

The Mother See also sent out a communiqué on His Holiness Karekin II's telephone conversation with His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, in which the Catholicos of All Armenians expressed his support to Catholicos Aram I. Catholicos Aram reported that a delegation of our brother clergy from the Catholicate of Cilicia visited the town of Latakia, where some 2,000 Armenians have sought refuge in the wake of the evacuation of Kessab.

Additionally, Catholicos Karekin II has spoken via telephone with His Grace Bishop Armash Nalbandian, Primate of the Armenian Diocese of Damascus, regarding the situation in Kessab and the relief of the people.

The Armenian Assembly of America has sent a letter to President Barack Obama asking the United States to take steps to safeguard the Kessab Armenians. I too have sent a letter to our President, in my capacity as Primate and on behalf of the Eastern Diocese.

Also, our Diocesan Ecumenical Director, Archbishop Vicken Aykazian, along with the Armenian Assembly's Bryan Ardouny, had

a meeting on March 27 at the U.S. State Department to emphasize the urgency of the predicament of the Kessab Armenians. Undersecretary of State Eric Rubin received them sympathetically and gave assurances that the United States would make a strong statement to the government of Turkey regarding the armed rebels' egress from that country into Syria.

All of this is the troubling news of the day. Most of our parishioners will know the town of Kessab as an Armenian stronghold since the Middle Ages, with Armenian roots dating even farther back, to at least the era of Tigran the Great. Armenians have long been the vast majority of its population, promoting a humane, tolerant, and vital civil, cultural, and religious life. Nearly every parish in our Diocese has a connection to Kessab through a church member or family relation. Indeed, Kessab was the much-loved birthplace of our late Catholicos of All Armenians, His Holiness Karekin I, of blessed memory.

The city has had episodes of tragedy in the past—notably in 1909, when Turkish armed detachments invaded and expelled our people, at the cost of nearly 200 lives; and in 1915, during the Genocide, when thousands of Armenians were killed in the forced death marches into the deserts of Deir ez-Zor and Jordan. With the onset of the Syrian civil war, the city had served as a safe-haven for our countrymen fleeing from the war-torn cities of Yacubiye, Rakka, and Aleppo. Kessab itself had mostly been spared from the violence of the Syrian conflict—until the painful events of this week.

With these details in mind, I ask our Diocesan parishes and families to offer prayers for our brothers and sisters in Kessab. In this hour of need, please remember them in your prayers, at home and in church. And remember, too, all our church leaders and Armenian clergymen who are trying to minister to our people in Kessab, in Syria, and throughout the Middle East. We express our fundamental solidarity with all our fellow churchmen and countrymen throughout the region.

I wish to remind you that the Diocese continues to accept donations on behalf of Syrian relief, which are distributed to our people through the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. I would ask our parishes to conduct special plate collections for this purpose on the next three Sundays—March 30, April 6, and April 13 (Palm Sunday)—with proceeds to be sent to the Diocese by Friday, April 18. Individuals may also make secure online contributions on the Diocesan website (please select the "Syrian Relief" item in the relevant drop-down menu).

Above all, in times like this we take strength in the example of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who suffered on our behalf—and who suffers alongside all his children, in their own desperate hours, now and always. We pray to our Lord for his guidance and his peace, and for a world where his children can live with security, respect, freedom, and dignity.

May he shine his holy light into our world, and may our humble prayers and contributions help to ease the suffering of our brothers and sisters in Kessab at this time.

With prayers,
Archbishop Khajag Barsamian, *Primate*

