

CPT Report from Suleimaniya, Iraq

February 26, 2011

Dear all,

Today was not a good day in Suleimaniya. The team joined the White Group this afternoon after returning from Halubja. Today was the day of engineers, doctors and other professionals raising their voices for change. The demonstration was going along fine when suddenly an explosion occurred from behind the stage. Black smoke filled the air. For a moment everyone seemed to be stunned and frozen. Then the crowd panicked and started running in different directions. Someone announced that the explosion was just an electrical explosion from a generator. The White Group raised their hands in an attempt to calm everyone down and gestured to the soldiers standing behind the White Group that everything was okay. Within 5 minutes hundreds from the crowd broke through the White Group line and ran directly up to the soldiers screaming at them and blaming them for what happened. Shortly after demonstrators told the White Group that a percussion bomb went off behind the stage. Accusations that the sound bomb was set the night before by people who want to destroy the demonstrations and Suleimaniya began to circulate.

The group of demonstrators who ran towards the soldiers behind our line were beginning to return towards the center. To the credit of these soldiers, they never raised their guns and with the exception of a few flying shoes, we did not see the demonstrators do anything more than scream at the soldiers.

For a few moments there was hope that this might just calm down without any further incident but then the shooting began. The place quickly turned chaotic and many people including the CPT team ran into the bazaar. The shooting continued for a few moments and then the merchants in the bazaar asked everyone to leave because they wanted to close their shops for fear that the bazaar would be destroyed. We stood in the street for a few minutes trying to get our bearings when another crowd of people stormed down the street. In order to not be trampled, we moved back against the wall and let the crowd run by. We later learned that they were running in fear that the soldiers would start shooting and many roads were closed at this point so there were no really clear exits.

The team at this moment is home and safe and local news reports one dead and 11 wounded. Violence in other cities is also being reported on local news. Other reports are coming in by phone and weblog, "my friend is calling me, he is excited and shouting. Karzan, you have to see this. Lots of protesters carrying rocks went toward the Peshmerga force and fight almost broke out again. But now they are making peace. Some members of the Peshmerga force are putting down their weapons and kissing the protesters. We are brothers and we won't shoot at you. Some (Peshmerga) are crying".

Peace, the CPTIraq Team

Christian Peacemakers Team – Update

February 26, 2011

Hi all

You may have heard about the recent riot and deaths in Suleimaniyah (see <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/02/17/iraq.protests/>)

I have talked to the team and everyone is well. Marius van Hoogstraten and Allan Slater were at a demo of 3,000 people which ended peacefully and those attending were dismissed. Michele Naar-Obed is the other team member and she was at a meeting in Rania for the day. After the demo Marius and Allan went off for some tea. In the meantime a group of 200 demonstrators left as a block and attacked the KDP party headquarters and were fired on by peshmerga militia defending the building. When Marius and Allan came out on the street there was gunfire in the distance and ambulances everywhere. They had no translator with them and it was unclear what was happening and what if anything they could do. In the end it seems around 10 people were killed and dozens injured. A 7pm curfew has been imposed but is being ignored. It is not clear who organized the original demo nor who initiated the attack on the KDP building. The team is trying to learn more from our NGO partners and will discern what role we might play from here.

There is also similar unrest in other parts of Iraq (Hawler, Dohuk, Mosul, Kut, Falluja, etc.). These demos appear to be spontaneous and not coordinated but focus on similar complaints about corruption, unemployment, insecurity, etc.

Doug Pritchard

Christian Peacemaker Teams

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.
The Prince of Peace will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Isaiah 9:7