

Iraqi Christian Priest refused entry to the UK
Letter to *The Tablet*, published July 18, 2009

I can indeed confirm that 'New Border Controls imposed by the Home Office are delaying the arrival of priests and religious from abroad' (*The Tablet*, July 4, 2009). In March I wrote to invite an Iraqi priest to come to stay in our parish for two months - not to work, but simply to rest away from the considerable pressures of ministry in 'post-conflict' Baghdad. His Bishop had asked me to do so when we met at a social event in the parish. Letters of invitation were duly written and letters of commendation obtained.

After considerable delays, we heard that he could not apply for a visa in Baghdad but would have to travel to Beirut: although we invaded his country, apparently we have no consulate facility for Iraqis in the Green Zone! It then turned out that the processing of visa applications in the Lebanon has been outsourced to a private company. More letters of invitation, more correspondence and more confusion, and then silence - until we learnt last week, second-hand and without explanation, that the application had been declined.

We had promised to underwrite all the costs of his stay and to ensure his return. We were inviting a member of a persecuted minority as a gesture of solidarity. Our would-be guest was a Catholic priest, not a terrorist-suspect. The whole story smacks of racism, callousness and hypocrisy. This is how our government attempts to show that it is 'tough' on migration - by banning non-white non-European visitors, regardless of their personal circumstances. Its behavior is shameful and its processing of claims shambolic.

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