

Freedom of Religion and the Persecution of Christians

Introduction

Open Doors UK & I is part of an international NGO network which has for over 50 years supported and strengthened persecuted Christians, now working in around 50 countries world-wide, in close consultation with church leaders and Christians who experience the reality of the denial of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights first-hand. Each year Open Doors International publishes the World Watch List, highlighting the 50 countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

On the basis of the research behind Open Doors' World Watch List this paper highlights the most important trends of persecution affecting Christians and Christian communities at the start of 2013, and offers an analysis of persecution – how and why individual Christians experience the denial of their rights as expressed in Article 18. We note that persecution of Christians is increasing, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. The paper also lists the 'hard facts' of persecution as recorded by the media in 2012.

Persecution of Christians is increasing

Statistics about persecution are hotly debated, but our reporting over many years from Christians within 65 countries where persecution is experienced is echoed by the PEW Forum's 2012 report, which states "In the year ending in mid-2010, government or social harassment of Christians was reported in 111 countries; the previous high was 107 countries in the first year of the study." (p. 22).

Persecution of Christians in Africa significantly increased in 2012 as a result of the increasing influence of Islamic extremism. This was most notable in Mali, and also in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Niger. We do not identify one overall plan from one source in the whole of Africa. However, we do see that radical Islamic groups are patiently waiting for the right time to show their power. Apart from the pattern of violent attacks, we see that radical Muslims are infiltrating politics, business and the judiciary, such as introducing Sharia family courts. On a number of occasions, extremists were ready to step into a power vacuum, as in Mali.

The situation in **Mali** has been very grave; it is not yet clear whether the recent intervention will have a positive impact in reducing the persecution of the Christian minority. When our World Watch List report was written three months ago, we stated that "the situation in Northern Mali is somehow similar to Saudi Arabia. Christians are simply no longer allowed to be there. A pastor from the northern part of Mali told Open Doors that he was informed that Muslim fundamentalists were planning to kill all Christians. He warned all his congregation members to leave. That happened. Hundreds of Christians have fled from the north. 'If this information had come to us later, the consequences could have been very serious. This violence could have resulted in mass slaughter. Not long after the warning, radical Muslims attacked the homes of Christians. Their houses were either destroyed or taken by the attackers.'"

The current situation in **Sudan** is also critical, and potentially catastrophic. There appears to be a concerted effort, breaking all human rights norms, to expel expatriate Christians from the country, to force those of southern Sudanese origin back to South Sudan and to harass Sudanese Christians.

Persecution of Christians does not necessarily occur only in countries where Christians are a minority. The trend is that persecution is increasing in countries where Muslims and Christians are fairly evenly divided among the population, or where Christians are even the majority in a country, such as **Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania**. The working method is to create small footholds where radical Muslims do not tolerate anyone with a different belief or religion, such as the area of Kenya bordering Somalia. The geographical increase of such footholds squeezes Christians resident in those areas and makes life impossible for them. The 2013

World Watch List's main story is not that Boko Haram and other terrorist organisations are the main source of persecution, but that the pattern of infiltration and strategic positioning is paving the way for radical Muslims to gain influence in society.

Islamic extremism is not the only source of persecution of Christians.

In Africa, the **Eritrea** government continues to severely restrict religious liberty: we estimate that up to 2,000 Christians are in prison; 31 cases of deaths of Christians in prison were reported in 2012. **North Korea** remains the most difficult country in the world to be a Christian. It is estimated that between 50,000 and 70,000 Christians suffer in horrific prison camps. The intense persecution has continued under new leader Kim Jong-Un.

The Middle East: a new exodus

The Arab Spring has had disastrous consequences for Christians – a major exodus of Christians from the Middle East is in progress. This was already true of **Iraq** and is rapidly becoming true most notably in **Egypt** and **Syria**. Jihadists have infiltrated the rebel movement in Syria, and tens of thousands have already fled. Christianity, with its historic roots in the Middle East, is rapidly and painfully being marginalised. As one of the powers who have taken the responsibility of intervening in Iraq, Afghanistan and now Syria, the UK government bears a particular responsibility for recognising this catastrophe and doing all in its power to protect those (of whatever religion) who have suffered as a result of these interventions.

Last year Open Doors focused on the Arab World, urging the British government to use its influence – directly with the nations of the Arab World and indirectly through the European Union and the United Nations – to: a) protect Christians and other religious minorities already under threat b) do everything possible to ensure that Christians are not forced to flee from their homes and become refugees and asylum seekers, but rather can remain safely, able to pursue their lives and livelihoods without fear c) urge that new constitutions fully support religious freedom as defined by Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights d) raise issues of religious liberty as a key topic in all dealings with the governments of the Arab World.

Situations can change.

China was once a major persecutor of Christians, but now their position is much improved – though Christians in China still do not enjoy full religious freedom. The government still considers the Church to be a political movement and wishes to be informed of all Christian activity. However, house searches, arrests and the confiscation of Bibles and Christian books no longer occur at a large scale. Instead, the government forces many church leaders to keep accounting for their whereabouts, which is seen as a way to keep them subdued and under control. At least 100 Chinese Christians are still in prison.

The nature of persecution

Open Doors defines persecution as 'any hostility experienced as a result of one's identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians both from within and outside Christianity'. We believe that persecution is therefore a denial of Article 18: any hostility directed towards an individual on the basis of their religious belief has the effect of limiting freedom of religion, whether or not that is the specific intention. To say that persecution has to be deliberate underestimates the implicit and indirect power of culture, over decades, created a society or situation that freezes Christians out of normal life.

We do not limit the term persecution to the more extreme forms of suffering because it is very difficult in practice to say what is, in fact, extreme. Often losing a job can be far worse in its effects than a beating in prison; being shunned by one's parents can be more psychologically scarring than being part of a skirmish on the street. Open Doors' World Watch List analyses persecution, the limitation of religious liberty, both in

terms of the 'squeeze' applied across five spheres of life and the 'smash' (physical violence) which can and does cut across and impact all these spheres of life.

Sphere one: Private Life. Every person has a private, interior life that is lived in their own space. Much persecution is intended to restrict freedom of belief to this area: their aim is the privatisation of faith - believe what you like in private, but do not manifest it in public. *"As long as the apostate keeps it to himself, rather than proclaiming it in public, thus becoming a danger to society, he should not be punished in accordance with the Islamic punishment for apostasy. However, someone who proclaims his apostasy in public, and calls for others to follow suit, is a danger to society, according to its norms, beliefs, laws, and constitution. If somebody acts in a corrupt and erroneous way in his own home, nobody has the religious or legal right to knock on his door, and ask what he is doing. But once his home turns into a den of iniquity, which threatens society, the law and the shari'a intervene."* (President Mursi of Egypt, TV interview, 19 May 2012.) But in North Korea, for example, the state seeks to deprive the Christian of the right to freedom of religion or belief even in their home. For Christians living in some Muslim states, there is no freedom in this area either, more often due to a hostile family culture.

Sphere two: Family Life. Hostility from the state or neighbours directed at family members is an acutely painful experience; so is hostility towards an individual from within their own extended family, even their own nuclear family. The aim is to stop the transmission and expression of belief. This experience is particularly acute for those from a Muslim background who choose to follow Christ. A grandmother reported her son as an apostate to the security police; her grandson, aged 3, saw his father dragged away and return, traumatised, three months later. The family lived secretly as Christians, publicly as Muslims. The boy's friends guessed he was a Christian and bullied him at school and in the street. Now a teenager, he is still a secret believer; the family commute to church. They cannot change their religious identity as recorded on their ID cards.

Sphere three: Community Life. Every person lives in a neighbourhood. This can have distinct characteristics, especially for those in countries where areas are organised according to ethnicity. In Pakistan for example, most Christians would be in trouble from local agents of persecution in the neighbourhood, such as local police, tribal figures or the local extremist Imam raising a mob around the corner. Persecution at a community level can often be expressed in impact on employment.

Sphere four: National Life. Every person lives in a state. Central (and local) government in any particular country can actively restrict the freedom of Christians to participate in civil society and more generally in public life. In Iran it is interesting to notice that the primary persecution Christians experience often comes from the state, and less from the family or community. Discrimination in education and employment may originate from national legislation.

Sphere five: Church Life. Every Christian is usually part of a church – even a very secret one, and Article 18 protects the freedom believers have to express their faith as a group without interference. When we accompanied Algerian church leaders to meet the relevant Foreign Office Minister recently, they raised the fact that it had proved impossible in practice to register any of their church buildings as places of worship, so that every church service was technically illegal; when we accompanied Naomi Long MP to meet the Algerian Ambassador, she very eloquently made the point that in addition it was a normal Christian practice to meet in homes for prayer and Bible study. Both collective expressions of faith should be protected under Article 18.

Violence This can be expressed and experienced within the family and the community. It can be perpetrated by neighbours, by marauders from within or from outside the neighbourhood, even the country. It can be directed at specific individuals, families, whole communities; it can also be directed at places of worship

when empty, or at the worshipping community when present. In each and every case it impacts individuals and is a direct denial of their human rights under Article 18.

We recognise that analysing persecution on a country basis can obscure vital variations in the experience of persecution. This is true on a geographical basis: Christians may live in freedom in one part of a country and face appalling persecution elsewhere – Nigeria would be a very obvious example of this. It is also true that different Christian communities can face very different levels of persecution in the same country: in many Middle Eastern countries, Christians from historic traditions face less and different kinds of persecution as a group than those who have chosen to become Christians having grown up as Muslims.

Therefore it is important to recognise the distinctive experience of four categories of Christians in any given country: a) Expatriate or migrant Christians; b) Members of historical Christian communities (like Roman Catholics, Orthodox, traditional Protestants) and/or government controlled churches; c) Converts to Christianity from ‘persecutor background’ (majority religion or ideology, traditional religion, etc.); d) Members of non-traditional Christian Communities (such as Evangelicals, Pentecostals, house churches) and other Christians not yet included.

The sources of the denial of freedom of religion and belief can be summarised as: a) Communist oppression – seeking to maintain communism (however defined) as the prescriptive national ideology; b) Islamic extremism – aiming to bring the country or the world under the ‘House of Islam’ through violent or non-violent actions; c) Religious militancy – where another religion is defined as the sole basis of national or ethnic identity either by the state or by extremist groups within the state, for example ‘Hindutva’ ideology in India, Buddhist militancy in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, Ultra-Orthodox Judaism in Israel; d) Dictatorial paranoia – in which religious freedoms suffer, alongside other freedoms, in the attempt to maintain power; e) Radical secularism – attempting to eradicate the Christian faith from the public domain, if possible even out of the hearts of people; f) Organised corruption – the creation of a climate of impunity, anarchy and corruption as a means for getting rich; g) Ecclesiastical arrogance – churches do not recognise nor want to give room for Christians outside their structure or theological definition; h) Tribal antagonism – the continuing influence of age-old norms and values shaped in tribal context, which can be in the ‘package’ of traditional religion or otherwise.

The right to change, the right to choose, the right to share: it remains our view that the greatest difficulties are faced by those who choose to become Christians having been born into a non-Christian ethno-religious grouping, and those who openly share their faith. The rights of individuals in one or both of these groups are specifically protected by the wording of Article 18, even though we recognise that the concept of ‘conversion’ is very difficult for countries where religious identity is inseparable from or closely identified with ethnic or national origin. In most interpretations of sharia, conversion by Muslims to other religions or becoming non-religious is strictly forbidden. In Israel, Jews who choose to become Christians can face significant difficulties.

Religious freedom is considerably more than freedom of worship. So while it was encouraging that the Foreign Secretary said, in response to the Maspero Massacre in Cairo in 2011, that ‘freedom of religious belief ... needs to be protected ... The ability to worship in peace is a vital component of any ... democratic society,’ this does not go far enough. We continue to be concerned at reports that within the Human Rights Council and the UN there is reluctance to promote the freedom to change one’s religion as a vital component of full religious liberty for fear of the backlash from OIC nations. This was evidenced by the reaction to the Special Rapporteur’s report to the UN in 2012. In far too many countries there are particular difficulties for evangelical Christians, where attempts to share one’s faith openly are particularly risky. While not automatically supporting every method of evangelism as being necessarily appropriate, nonetheless this freedom is a vital part of Open Doors’ understanding of religious liberty, and it is one in urgent need of

defence. Article 18 explicitly states “this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief.” Article 19 says “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression... to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

Two myths of persecution

A) The more incidents of persecution there are, the more persecution there must be. This belief, while on the surface apparently an obvious truth, fails to take into account the difference between squeeze (pressure) and smash (plain violence). The Christians of the Maldives are surrounded on every side with massive pressure from friends, neighbours, family, and the government, which means they can hardly express their faith at all. Because they are so persecuted, they are virtually unable to witness. If you were looking for a list of incidents where Christians were beaten, put in jail or deported, there would be very few. Sometimes the degree of persecution is so intense, and so all-pervasive, it actually results in fewer incidents of persecution, since acts of public witness and defiance are rare. So while there is no evidence of smashing the church through violence and imprisonment, the squeeze is what is killing the church. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that many persecutors prefer to squeeze the church, rather than smash it, in the belief that it is a more successful form of persecution.

B) The most violent persecutors of the church are its main persecutors. The most violent persecutor of Christians in Northern Nigeria in recent years is the Islamic terrorist group, Boko Haram, who have bombed churches and shot pastors. It's an unsubtle attempt to smash the church. But in fact, for most Christians, the greatest threat comes from a creeping cultural Islamisation which has been stealthily progressing since the 1980's, until Christians suddenly realise they are second class citizens in a culture that was once hospitable to them, and is now hostile to them. This 'squeeze' is as much a denial of freedom of religion and belief but cannot be tracked by monitoring specific incidents.

The 'hard facts' of persecution

Open Doors carefully screens media and internet sources to collect all persecution-related hard facts, which allows an objective description of the intensity and the scope of the violence against Christians that occurred during our most recent reporting period (November 2011-October 2012).

Many countries, including **Iraq** and **Syria**, have been plagued by a context of structural violence, in which Christians – including historical Christian communities – are increasingly vulnerable. The continuing hostilities against Christians in **Egypt**, mostly instigated by Salafists, have also continued in this period. **Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia** and **Indonesia** are countries that require close monitoring, as Islamic extremism is rapidly gaining strength. **Pakistan, Sudan, Somalia, Iran, Mali** and **Yemen**, among others, also follow patterns of Islamic extremism. Hindu nationalists repeatedly persecute Christians in **India**. Organised crime is the main source of persecution in **Latin American** countries.

Between November 2011 and October 2012, we recorded 1,201 killings of Christians worldwide (which gives an average of 100 killings a month), of which 791 happened in Nigeria, making this arguably the most dangerous country for a Christian to live, with outright slaughters in places like Jos, Abuja, Kaduna and Bauchi.

When comparing regions, the majority of the killings happened in Africa, followed by the Middle East, South East Asia and Latin America. 161 Christians were killed in Iraq, 89 in Syria, 44 in Kenya, 19 in Egypt, 15 in Pakistan, 15 in Sudan, 13 in India, 9 in the Philippines, 9 in Lebanon, 2 in Indonesia, 5 in Mexico, 3 in Somalia and 3 in Burma. Killings of Christians were also recorded in Colombia, Guatemala, Mali and Yemen.

We recorded a total of 2,121 cases of physical aggression against Christians, of which 578 happened in Nigeria, 359 in India, 223 in Syria, 205 in Kenya, 165 in Indonesia and 143 in Egypt.

During our reporting period, 280 churches or other Christian buildings (including Christian schools, hospitals, shops, etc.) were burned or destroyed. Moreover, there were 253 attempts to destroy churches or Christian buildings and at least 241 churches or Christian buildings closed or hindered. To cite a few examples, 69 church buildings (or other Christian buildings) were destroyed in Egypt, 63 in Iraq and 46 in Nigeria.

A higher number of Christian buildings were destroyed during the month of December 2011 than during any other month in the reporting period. 79 Christian buildings were attacked and/or destroyed in December, including 24 churches, which is roughly 25% of all Christian buildings that were destroyed during our reporting period. Targeting Christian holidays is a common strategy used to instil fear in Christian communities. Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, have a high symbolic value, as they are a visible public expression of the Christian faith. Religious freedom is not only a private matter of conscience, but also has a collective dimension. Violent incidents on Christian holidays give a clear signal to Christians: you are not welcome to openly celebrate your faith.

More than 60,000 Christians were threatened. 235 Christians were expelled from their houses, mostly in countries where persecution is most intense in the community sphere, and where the main persecution dynamics are 'Islamic extremism' and/or 'Tribal antagonism'. Once again, most of the expulsions happened in Nigeria. In Mexico, around 40 indigenous Christians from the Yashtinin community were expelled from their homes in the San Cristobal municipality of Mexico under threat of their lives.

279 Christians were kidnapped during our reporting period, 227 of which happened in Syria. High numbers of Christians were forced to leave their countries, the vast majority of them from Syria, but also from Sudan, Mali, Egypt and Laos. 1,028 Christians were arrested in Syria, China, Russia, Pakistan, Eritrea, Iran and Egypt, amongst other countries.

Finally, a total of 10 cases of sexual assault against Christians women were recorded in the media (including rape, forced marriages, etc.), of which at least 6 happened in Pakistan, 1 in Iran, 1 in Burma and 2 in India. However, due to high levels of fear and taboo around this issue, cases of sexual assaults can be expected to be highly under-reported. Other sources indicate that gender abuse, as it relates to Christian persecution, happens frequently in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan and Egypt.

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