

China: Ban on Islamic clothing in Xinjiang

The Dui Hua Foundation's Human Rights Journal (27.02.2018) – <http://bit.ly/2g4qXRB> –



Pedestrians walk past propaganda posters in Urumqi, Xinjiang. Image credit: The Uyghur American Association.

In April 2011, France became the first Western country to ban the wearing of full-face veils in public. Similar national and regional bans in other secular Western countries soon followed, including in Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Austria, and Canada. In Australia, there is ongoing legislative debate on the issue. Under these bans, anybody caught wearing a burka (a veil covering the full face and body) or a niqab (a veil covering the face except the eyes) in public can face fines and in some cases even imprisonment.

China is an officially atheist country. Civil servants and teachers across the country have long been prohibited from

participating in religious activities or wearing religious clothing in public. In schools, students can be disqualified from scholarships, government subsidies, attending their graduation ceremonies and even face expulsion if found wearing religious clothing on campus. Around the same time when many in the West were busy passing anti-Islamic legislation, China was rocked by the Urumqi Riots of July 2009. Shortly after, the Xinjiang government began tightening restrictions on Islamic clothing on security grounds in the autonomous region, home to a Muslim population of over 13 million.

In enforcing restrictions on Islamic clothing, Chinese officials have denied that veils are a part of Uyghur culture and have attempted to stigmatize wearers as uneducated and sharing a propensity towards religious extremism. A Phoenix News Media article in 2014 reported that veils had historically never been part of Uyghur culture and only first gained traction in southern Xinjiang in the 1980s. While officials argue that veils are unique to uneducated Uyghurs who share a propensity towards extremism, they also blame religious extremism in Xinjiang as deriving from overseas forces – a line of argument frequently used to justify the forced deportations of overseas Uyghurs. A Uyghur researcher from the Xinjiang Academy of Social Science's Institute of Sociology opined that the phenomenon of religious extremism was largely driven by the high and disproportionate rates of poverty and unemployment among the Uyghur population. As Xinjiang becomes increasingly dominated by a market-oriented economy run by the Han population, Uyghurs feel they face greater economic, cultural, religious, and political marginalization. The same Uyghur scholar stated that the local Uyghurs' disillusionment with their future in Xinjiang has led more Uyghur women to adopt the black veil and jilbab in place of their traditional headscarves, especially after the 2009 attacks and the ensuing incidents of ethnic unrest in the region.

Not only has Xinjiang outlawed the wearing of veils in public, but Dui Hua has also uncovered cases of individuals facing criminal charges for wearing veils in their own homes and for selling the banned clothing items.

The “Five Abnormalities”



The “Five Abnormalities” in Karamay, Xinjiang. August 2014. Image credit: ifeng.com

The restrictions on Islamic clothing in Xinjiang first emerged in a number of localities in province’s southern region. However, after the 2009 Urumqi attacks, similar regulations were implemented in northern Xinjiang. Restrictions in the north remained relatively lax until 2013, when the Xinjiang government issued a provisional-wide directive known as Document No.11. In a question and answer format, the document

serves as a set of guidelines for local authorities and as a warning to the public on how “illegal religions and extremism” will be handled; there are three mentions of the ban on the jilbab in the text. The document does not specify what the punishment for wearing a jilbab is. It merely calls on officials to “resolutely handle” violators.

It should be noted that the translation of terms used to describe Islamic clothing under Chinese regulations differ from what is generally used in Islamic communities. In August 2014, authorities in Karamay, a city in northern Xinjiang, banned those wearing Islamic clothing and those with beards from boarding a public bus, including women and girls who were wearing what authorities call a jilbab. In Islamic communities, a jilbab refers to a long and loose-fitting garment or cloak designed to cover the entire body while leaving the face visible, whereas under Chinese regulations they use the word jilbab for what would be considered a burka or a niqab in most Islamic communities, which covers the body and the face. The first category of women shown in the “Five Abnormalities,” with veils covering their face and hair but not their eyes, are wearing what would be considered a niqab outside of China, but is called a jilbab in China.

The ban also prohibits young women from wearing what China calls a niqab, a garment that would generally be referred to as a hijab (a headscarf covering the hair and neck while leaving the face visible) in most Islamic communities.

As a provincial-wide directive, Document No.11 has been introduced in localities across Xinjiang. In Karamay, authorities have banned the jilbab, the niqab, all face-covering veils, as well as young men from growing “big beards.” The ban has also outlawed clothes featuring the Islamic star and crescent symbol.

Also in 2013, Xinjiang’s Ili Prefecture issued a provisional rule to proscribe the “five abnormalities” from all public

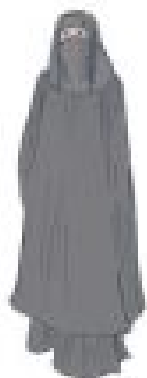
spaces. The 2014 Ili Yearbook reported investigating nearly 1,000 violators and confiscating 7,364 jilbabs and garments with the star and crescent symbol. The following year, the capital of Urumqi followed suit. Instead of using the term jilbab, which opens room for debate about what constitutes a jilbab, the Urumqi regulation has added the more secular-sounding but even vaguer term – “face-masking robes” (面罩) – to the Chinese legal lexicon, giving authorities even greater power to determine what garments can be considered illegal.

Effective April 1, 2017, Xinjiang’s “Anti-Extremism Regulations” claimed that the wearing of “face-masking robes” and “abnormal beards” symbolized extremism. The regulations also officially expanded the administrative ban to the entire autonomous region.

Criminalization of Islamic Clothing

Niqab

A veil covering the head and face, but not the eyes, usually worn with a loose black garment (abaya) that covers from head to feet.



Hijab

A general term meaning ‘to cover’ or ‘veil’, most commonly refers to a headscarf that covers the hair and neck, but not the face.



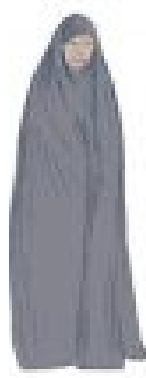
Burka

A veil that covers the entire body and face, with a mesh window or grille across the eyes for a woman to see out of.



Chador

A full-length cloak worn by many Iranian women, typically held closed at the front by the wearer’s hands or under their arms.



Dupatta

A long scarf loosely draped across the head and shoulders, common in south Asia and often paired with matching garments.



The five main categories of Islamic clothing in the Islamic world. Image credit: ABC News

Violators of the aforementioned bans can face criminal

prosecution under a number of offenses. One can be prosecuted for “forcing others to wear terrorism, extremism clothes or symbols,” a new offense that carries a maximum sentence of three years’ imprisonment. It was added to the Criminal Law in November 2015 and can be used in cases where violence or coercion is involved. Dui Hua is unable to find online judgments to understand how often this offense is being used by authorities. Unofficial news media has reported on cases of Uyghur women sentenced for promoting the wearing of headscarves, but the exact charges remain unknown.

Dui Hua has found one case where the charge of illegal business activity was used to prosecute an individual for selling banned Islamic clothing. Yang Bao’an (杨保安), a Han Chinese man who originally migrated to Xinjiang from Hunan, was sentenced to three years’ imprisonment in April 2015 in Ili Prefecture for selling a hundred niqabs in a shopping center in Korgas (China’s westernmost port bordering Kazakhstan). Twenty-four of the niqabs carried the star and crescent symbol. The court found that Yang violated the “five abnormalities” ban that had been widely enforced in Ili Prefecture. Yang pled innocent on several grounds – 1. He was not aware of the meaning behind the star and crescent symbol; 2. Nobody had purchased any of the garments from him; 3. He did not know about the local rules since he had only just arrived in Xinjiang. Given that he had obtained a university education, the court found that Yang should have been aware and cautious about local regulations and that his actions had adversely affected the social stability of the area.

There is also evidence that wearing banned Islamic clothing can fall under the purview of the crime of “picking quarrels and provoking troubles.” In September 2014, the Supreme People’s Court, the Supreme People’s Procuratorate, and the Ministry of Public Security jointly issued a judicial interpretation to expand the applicable scope of this “pocket crime” in cases related to terrorism and extremism. An

individual is now punishable for this offense if they disrupt social order by “willfully attacking, chasing, intercepting, and insulting others” while calling others “infidels or religious traitors.”

In March 2015, China Youth Online reported that a court in Kashgar sentenced a group of religious extremists for “picking quarrels and provoking troubles.” The report cited one case in which a Uyghur couple repeatedly refused to comply with “Project Beauty,” a campaign to discourage men from keeping long beards and women from wearing veils and headscarves. The husband was sentenced to six years’ imprisonment for “ignoring the national law.” Not only was he punished for keeping a long beard, but he was also punished for encouraging his wife to wear a veil. As his wife was said to have shown remorse, she was given a relatively lenient two-year imprisonment sentence. The original report was removed the day after it was originally posted. An anonymous source who proclaimed to have written the article allegedly sent an apology statement via WeChat for misreporting the case. Critics remain skeptical of its authenticity, with some suspecting that the apology was made under duress. The article has since been widely circulated online and remains accessible on official news websites.

Banning Islamic Clothing in the Home

Although the ban on Islamic clothing has been enforced in the name of “maintaining public order,” Dui Hua has found cases where authorities in Xinjiang have enforced the ban in people’s homes. Dui Hua uncovered a judgment in which a Muslim man, Gong Xiaojun (郭晓军, ethnicity unknown), was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment for “disrupting official business” in Urumqi after arguing with community cadres in December 2014. When the community cadres paid Gong a home visit in June 2014, they found that Gong had grown an “abnormal beard.” The cadres

admonished Gong for his beard and Gong allegedly responded with “extreme language” insisting that he grew the beard because he simply liked the way it looked.

The cadres informed Gong and his wife about the ban on “black religious clothing,” and accused his wife of wearing a jilbab. Gong argued that his wife was wearing a long loose black robe, not what the cadres were calling a jilbab and that the cadres had no right to intervene in what his family chose to wear at home. He claimed that he had requested his wife to wear the robe and his wife agreed that she had done so voluntarily. Gong was first indicted for “picking quarrels and provoking troubles,” but was convicted of a different charge – “disrupting official business.” The judgment did not explain in what ways Gong’s language was “extreme,” it only vaguely stated that his language was “extreme” and provocative enough to disrupt law enforcement.

Beyond Xinjiang

For Muslims who belong to China’s Hui minority, reports suggest that they currently do not face the same intensity of restrictions as Muslims in Xinjiang do. In a propaganda film entitled *Leaving Heart in Hezhou* (离开心中的那抹黑) about China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative, the Hui women of Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture in Gansu Province are portrayed in long black garments covering their bodies, hair, and necks. While the same clothes are banned in public and private spaces in Xinjiang and violators can face imprisonment, in Linxia, also known as “China’s Little Mecca,” Hui women are currently free to wear veils in public. However, given the growing restrictions on religious freedom in Linxia, the question remains for how long this freedom will last.

Xinjiang’s ban on Islamic clothing is no less controversial than the anti-Islamic legislation we see in the West and is no

less discriminatory to Muslims. Since joining the global ranks of countries that impose restrictions on the appearance of its Muslim citizens, China has been under fire by human rights groups for intruding on its citizens' religious freedoms. Although transparency of criminal cases involving the ban on Islamic clothing leaves much to be desired in Xinjiang, given what we know about how the sellers of Islamic clothing and those who wear Islamic clothing in their homes have fared, it is likely that those caught wearing Islamic clothing in public are facing increasing risks.

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**Russia: Danish Jehovah's
Witness Dennis Christensen's**

custody extended another five months

Stetson Russia Religion News (23.02.2018) – <http://bit.ly/2GPm0Yc> – The detention in custody of the Dane Dennis Christensen was extended until at least 1 August 2018; he has already been held in the investigation cell for about nine months because he professes the religion of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The decision on 22 February 2018 to extend the detention was issued by Aleksei Rudnev, a judge of the Zheleznodorozhnyi district court of the city of Orel.

Meanwhile, the start of the principal hearings in the criminal case regarding Dennis Christensen was scheduled for 26 February 2018. He is accused of continuing the activity of the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses, which was liquidated by a court. In fact, Christensen does not have anything to do with this organization. He only exercised the right that is guaranteed by the constitution of the Russian federation to "everybody," namely the right to have religious convictions and to act in accordance with them. (tr. by PDS, posted 23 February 2018)

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South Asia: Who made my clothes? Asian workers' diaries show 'human cost'

The largely female workforce in South Asia is often underpaid, faces verbal and sexual harassment on a daily basis and is forced to work long hours, campaigners say

By Anuradha Nagaraj

Thomson Reuters Foundation (21.02.2018) – <http://tmsnrt.rs/2HN2lJL> – Women making clothes for global fashion brands in South Asia are often yelled at by their supervisors and have to take out loans to make ends meet, hundreds of garment workers' diaries showed.

A year-long study of more than 500 workers in Cambodia, India and Bangladesh found women often work overtime or borrow money from their husbands to feed their families and pay rent.

"I wouldn't have enough money if we ate a lot," read one entry by Chenda in Cambodia, where researchers found most workers were in their 20s and married, with some primary education and

earned about \$45 for a 48-hour week.

Fashion industry manufacturers have come under pressure to improve conditions and workers' rights, particularly after the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh.

The largely female workforce in South Asia is often underpaid, faces verbal and sexual harassment on a daily basis and is forced to work long hours, campaigners say.

The research, published on Tuesday, was carried out by transparency campaigners Fashion Revolution and The C&A Foundation, affiliated with retailer C&A, which partners with the Thomson Reuters Foundation on trafficking.

The diaries' aim, they said, was to show "the human cost" of fashion and improve workers' lives.

"This gives brands something to consider above and beyond their margins when deciding where to make their clothes," Eric Noggle, research director at Microfinance Opportunities, said in a statement.

"Their decisions have a real and meaningful impact on the lives of these women and their families."

Researchers found that India had the best living and working

schoolgirls missing after Boko Haram attack

The Nigerian government on Sunday confirmed that 110 girls were missing after a Boko Haram school attack in the northeast, following days of silence on the children's fate.

France 24 (26.02.2018) – <http://bit.ly/2Fyz1Gm> – “The Federal Government has confirmed that 110 students of the Government Science and Technical College in Dapchi, Yobe State, are so far unaccounted for, after insurgents believed to be from a faction of Boko Haram invaded their school on Monday,” the information ministry said in a statement.

The statement came after authorities were unable to account for 110 of the school's 906 students, the ministry said.

The kidnapping has raised questions about the military's repeated claims that the Islamist militants are on the verge of defeat, after nearly nine years of bitter fighting.

It has also revived memories of the 2014 mass abduction of more than 200 schoolgirls from Chibok that shook the world.

On Monday night, terrified pupils fled the boarding school when heavily armed fighters in military fatigues and turbans stormed the town, shouting “Allahu Akbar” (“God is greatest”).

The authorities initially denied that any student had been kidnapped.

On Friday, President Muhammadu Buhari apologised to the girls' families, saying: "This is a national disaster. We are sorry that this could have happened."

Targeting education

Former military ruler Buhari was elected in 2015 on a promise to defeat Boko Haram, after the jihadists grew in strength under his predecessor, Goodluck Jonathan.

Jonathan was lambasted for his tardy response to the Chibok abduction, which saw 276 girls from the town in Borno state taken in the dead of night.

A teacher at the school, Amsani Alilawan, said there were soldiers in Dapchi until last month but they were then redeployed.

"One month back, they carry (take away) all soldiers, they transferred them to another side, they leave us without security," he said.

Enraged relatives of the missing girls this week tried to surround the convoy of the state mayor of Yobe, only to be

pushed back by the security forces.

The kidnapping is the worst jihadist assault to have hit Nigeria since Buhari came to power.

Schools, particularly those with a secular curriculum, have been targeted by Boko Haram, whose name roughly translates from Hausa as “Western education is forbidden”.

Boko Haram’s quest to establish a hardline Islamic state in northeast Nigeria has left at least 20,000 dead and made more than 2.6 million others homeless since 2009.

The jihadists have increasingly turned to kidnapping for ransom as a way to finance their operations and win back key commanders in prisoner swaps with the Nigerian government.

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Rights coalition takes on female genital mutilation in Egypt

By Rahma Diaa

Al-Monitor (13.02.2018) – <http://bit.ly/2BzgNo6> – Women and human rights organizations in Egypt marked the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Feb. 6 by announcing an “Anti-FGM Action Plan” to create new policies and mechanisms to reduce these practices against women and young girls in Egypt.

According to the most recent gender-based violence survey conducted by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics in 2015, 9 out of 10 women in Egypt have undergone FGM. In 2014, that figure was about 92% of married women aged between 15 and 49, with 78.4% of the operations performed by doctors and nurses.

Representatives of 146 organizations were present at the press conference, including the Tadwein Gender Research Center, the New Woman Foundation, the Centre for Egyptian Women Legal Assistance, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, the Women’s Center for Legal Guidance and Awareness, Salemah for Women’s Empowerment, the Cairo Center for Development, the Egyptian Coalition on the Rights of the Child and the Union of

Associations to Combat Harmful Practices against Women and Children.

Amal Fahmi, the director of Tadwein and the group's coordinator, told Al-Monitor that efforts by state institutions against FGM practices have not achieved the necessary changes. They have criminalized FGM without setting up a framework to enforce the law or raising awareness of the psychological and physical dangers of female circumcision.

"The situation is getting worse as 80% of FGM procedures are done at the hands of doctors, according to the stats obtained by the anti-FGM associations and organizations. The campaign that was recently launched aims to pressure the government to change its approach, raise awareness through sex education courses in schools in addition to media awareness campaigns against the medicalization of female genital cutting and develop a human rights discourse against FGM with a focus of women's rights to health and bodily integrity," Fahmi explained.

Fahmi also stressed the need for the government to enforce the laws criminalizing the custom to act as a deterrent and to stop its spread. She noted that the government will have to train health inspectors, police and prosecutors to monitor for and detect FGM and respond to incidences of it.

Since 2008, when the state added Article 242 to the Penal Code criminalizing FGM, only two cases have been brought to court. The first was in 2015, when the Mansoura Appeals Court sentenced a doctor to two years in prison with hard labor and

closed his practice for one year after a child death following a procedure.

Similarly, in July 2016 in Suez, a doctor, anesthetist and the victim's mother were prosecuted in the death of a girl during a circumcision surgery. They were charged with manslaughter, and each received suspended sentences of one year in prison.

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi issued Law No. 78 of 2016 to amend Article 242. Before that point, the article called for imprisonment between three months and two years or a fine of \$282. After the change, those accused of practicing FGM face harsher punishments: imprisonment for a period of no less than five years and no more than seven.

Reda el-Danbouki, the director of the Women's Center for Legal Guidance and Awareness, told Al-Monitor that the coalition will lobby for an amendment to close a loophole created by Article 61, which allows for violence committed to protect oneself or others against serious physical or moral harm. Danbouki said lawyers or judges could claim circumcision is done for necessary medical reasons, "basing their argument on this article."

Danbouki added that there is no need to increase FGM-related punishment as the real change will come when the existing law is enforced and the government starts inspecting hospitals and medical centers, punishing perpetrators and raising awareness on the dangers of this practice, which many Egyptians continue to view as necessary according to Sharia despite a fatwa by Dar al-Ifta declaring FGM haram (religiously forbidden).

According to a survey of Egyptian youth conducted by the International Population Council in 2017, 70% of young men and 57% of young women feel that FGM is necessary.

Azza Soliman, the director of the Centre for Egyptian Women Legal Assistance, told Al-Monitor that the campaign is intended to revitalize the efforts of the human rights organizations that took the first steps to fight FGM in 1997. Back then, their work brought about a drastic change in the rhetoric around FGM, and for the first time people started talking about it as violence against women.

“This group conducted thorough studies on the history of FGM to prove that it was not related to Islam or Pharaonic traditions but rather a practice that originated in Africa. Consequently, they worked to remove the religious framework and basis for this practice and demanded an end to it,” Soliman added.

“In 2003, the organizations’ efforts came to a halt, when the authorities took it upon themselves to combat FGM but failed to bring about a substantial change, prompting the women’s organizations to join hands and try to make a real difference to protect women and young girls against the dangers of this practice,” Soliman added.

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Also see HRWF’s work on FGM/c: [Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting & Religion](#)

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Iceland; 500 Icelandic physicians back bill to outlaw circumcision

JTA(23.02.2018) – <http://bit.ly/2CGWSQP> – Hundreds of physicians in Iceland and some of Belgium's top doctors came out in support of a bill proposing to criminalize nonmedical circumcision of boys in the Scandinavian island nation.

The approximately 500 Icelandic physicians who backed the bill that was submitted last month to the parliament cited the World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki on ethical principles.

“Potential complications should offset the benefits” of male circumcision, “which are few,” the Icelandic physicians wrote in a joint statement published Wednesday.

Advocates of male circumcision include many physicians who

believe it reduces the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and genital infections.

In Belgium, several prominent physicians, including Guy T'Sjoen of Ghent University Hospital, told the De Morgen daily they also support a ban.

"As a physician, I find it very regrettable that we have thousands of unnecessary circumcisions annually of boys who can't have their say about it," he said in an interview published Tuesday.

In Denmark, a petition featured on the parliament's website proposing to ban nonmedical circumcision of boys has received 20,000 signatures out of the 50,000 needed to come up for a parliamentary vote as draft resolution. As per a new law, the petition, which was posted on Feb. 1, will remain active for 180 days.

Throughout Scandinavia, the nonmedical circumcision of boys under 18 is the subject of a debate on children's rights and religious freedoms. The children's ombudsmen of all Nordic countries – Finland, Iceland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway – released a joint declaration in 2013 proposing a ban, though none of these countries has enacted one.

In the debate, circumcision is under attack from right-wing politicians who view it as a foreign import whose proliferation is often associated mostly with Muslim immigration. And it is also opposed by left-wing liberals and atheists who denounce it as a primitive form of child abuse.

HRWF Comment

It is to be feared that this anti-circumcision campaign will be exploited by anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim actors in a number of other countries.

Russia: Jehovah's Witnesses' property in Far East confiscated

Arbitration in Priamurie deprives Jehovah's Witnesses of property in Tynda

RIA Novosty (21.02.2018) – <http://www2.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/180221a.html> – An arbitration court of Amur oblast made a decision to deprive the religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses* (whose activity is banned in Russia because of extremism) of property, the website of the court reports.

By a decision of the Russian Supreme Court of 20 April 2017, the activity of the organization "Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia"* and local religious organizations that are members of its structure was terminated. The Russian Ministry of Justice entered the Jehovah's Witnesses* into the list of organizations that have been liquidated for extremism. The Russian Supreme Court decided to convert to the ownership of the Russian federation the property of the liquidated organization that remains after the satisfaction of the claims of creditors.

According to information of the file of the arbitration court, the banned religious organization in Tynda owns land and a structure of 431.4 square meters in area.

"Because the local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses* (of the city of Tynda) owns a parcel of land in the city of Tynda, the Russian Ministry of Justice for Amur oblast requested ordering with respect to the organization

proceedings for distribution of identified property. By decision of the arbitration court of the Amur oblast, the petition of the directorate of the Russian Ministry of Justice for Amur oblast was granted,” the website of the court reports.

The proceedings for distribution of the property are ordered by 6 August 2018. Sergei Kryazhev (Moscow) was appointed arbitration manager.

*An extremist organization prohibited in Russia.
(tr. by PDS, posted 21 February 2018)

**Girls are a worry until
death; هم البنات للممات**



Painting by SB OverSeas Beneficiary

Written by Jenna Benferhat, SB OverSeas

HRWF (21.02.2018) – Mariam's family was always known for being progressive. Her father allowed the girls to decide when to start wearing the hijab. Mariam didn't start wearing it until she was 11, when her Islamic middle school wouldn't allow her to attend without covering her hair. Her father received countless complaints from family members and friends, asking why his second eldest daughter hadn't put on the hijab, until she finally did at the age of 14. His eldest daughter, Lara, was married at the age of 19, when she found a husband she desired. Four months later, when Lara fled her marriage due to severe abuse at the hands of her husband, her father protected her from her abuser. When Lara discovered she was pregnant with her abuser's son, her father offered to raise him as his own.

Mariam's father died in 2010 after fighting a brain tumor. The following year, her family was forced to flee Syria as a result of the war. With the loss of her father came the loss of her freedom to choose her country, her husband, her future.

Mariam had been living as a refugee in Lebanon for three years when her mother arranged her marriage with her cousin, Nasr. She was seventeen and had hoped to go back to Syria to continue her studies. She had studied until the 10th grade, which is already beyond what most women in her farming village would complete. She begged to hold off the marriage, but her mother told her it was time to become a woman. It was still not safe to return to Syria, and her mother was concerned that she would not be able to provide for the family of 9.

Mariam and Nasr were married in 2014. She was 17, and he was 24.

Soon after their marriage, Mariam had her first pregnancy and, after three months, her first miscarriage. Her doctor said that her body was not ready for childbirth. Her second

pregnancy followed two months later and was laden with complications.

“I wasn’t ready for my first child. My son would cry, and I would cry,” she half laughed. “My son would cry, and I would cry,” she repeated, now with despair. “I didn’t know what to do. I wasn’t ready to be a mother. Every night, he would cry, and I would cry.”

“It was harder for my cousin, Eman” she explained. Eman was married at 12 to a 25 year old man. Eman is now 16 and recently gave birth to her second child. She had complications with both child births. Her first child was born two months premature, because, her doctor explained, her body was unable to support the full term.

Nearly every early marriage Mariam described, including her own, began with abuse. During the first year of her marriage, Mariam’s husband would hit her. She would run to her mother crying, telling her how she hated her marriage and how her husband would hit her. “My mother taught me how to be a wife,” she explained. She now knew to make his bath when he asked, to cook when he asked, to keep the house clean for him. Her husband was kind now. They got along now. Her husband stopped hitting her when she began “acting like a wife.”

Mariam’s friend, Fatima, was married at 12 to a 35 year old man. The neighbors would hear abuse at all hours of the night. She recalled their disdain, “She doesn’t understand how to be a wife.”

According to Mariam, the number of early marriages increased dramatically with the start of the Syrian war. When news spread of militants sexually assaulting and murdering girls near their village, parents feared for their daughter’s safety and hoped that marriage would serve as a form of protection for them.

Even without these threats, girls are still married young

outside Syria. Mariam explained that, like with her own, many families now struggle to support themselves. Marrying off girls at a young age means one less mouth to feed, one less body in their cramped rooms and one less child to worry about.

She said that people from her community have never cared much about girls. A common saying amongst those from her village is, “هم البنات للممات” meaning “Girls are a worry until death.”

When a man courts a woman in Mariam’s community, the man must ask the woman’s family for tea. If the girl’s parents accept, then the man goes to the girl’s family’s home with his own family. Over unsipped tea, the man proposes marriage to the girl’s father. If he accepts, they sip the tea. If the father rejects the proposal, the tea remains unsipped.

She listed girl after girl. Courting after courting ended in sipped tea. Child after child wed.

India: 2017 ‘one of the most traumatic years for Indian Christians’

By Anto Akkara

World Watch Monitor (19.02.2018) – <http://bit.ly/2sBSlzm> – The Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) has described 2017 as “one of the most traumatic” years for Indian Christians in a decade after it recorded 351 verified incidences of hate crimes against Christians during the year.

The Religious Liberty Commission of the EFI, which brings together Christians from more than 50 Protestant denominations, said the government needed to restore Christians' trust in its ability to protect them.



Hindu radicals burn a dummy replica of Cardinal Telesphore Toppo of Ranchi. (Photo: Catholic Bishops' Conference of India)

The figure of 351 in the commission's annual report, 'Hate and Targeted violence against Christians in India', was not exhaustive, the authors added. "Most cases go unreported either because the victim is terrified, or the police, especially in the northern states, just turn a blind eye and refuse to record the mandatory First Information Report [criminal complaint registered by the police]."

The report, which was published on 16 February, said the

commission had said that non-Hindu communities were being targeted “with impunity” and urged the Indian government to punish those who were “spreading hatred” against them.

The report’s authors drew parallels with the scale of violence experienced last year and what they termed the “pogrom” that took place in Kandhamal in 2008, when nearly 100 Christians were killed, 6,000 Christian houses and 300 churches were plundered, leaving 56,000 Christians homeless.

The number of recorded hate crimes against Christians in India shows a rise in recent years from 147 in 2014, to 177 in 2015, to 134 in the first six months of 2016.

The new report listed four murders, 110 incidences of “physical violence/arrest”, 70 of “threats and harassment”, 64 occasions when worship was forcibly stopped, and 49 cases of Christians being falsely accused and arrested.

The report noted that India’s Hindu-nationalist government had acknowledged in Parliament that “communal violence”, the term used to define clashes between religious groups, “increased 28 per cent over three years to 2017”.

EFI’s general secretary, Rev. Vijayesh Lal, told World Watch Monitor today (19 February) the situation for Indian Christians “is deteriorating pretty rapidly”.

He suggested that the rise in anti-Christian violence was

eroding Christians' trust in their government. "The confidence of the community in the government needs to be restored. We are presenting this report to the government to take necessary corrective action," Rev. Lal said.

"I am afraid the worst will unfold in 2019," Rev. Lal added, suggesting that there could be an escalation in anti-Christian violence around next spring's elections, to stigmatise Christians as threat to "Hindu India".

The report suggests the violence is focused on Sunday worship and Lent and Christmas. Many incidents targeted church services and 54 cases were recorded in April, and 40 in December, both above the monthly average of 29.

"It is distressing to see even private worship being attacked by Hindu right-wing activists violating the privacy and sanctity of an individual or a family and trampling upon their constitutional rights," the report noted.

It also recorded new ways in which Christians were targeted. "Christian children going to attend Bible camps with their parents' permission, being taken into custody [by police] and detained for days on suspicion of conversion is bizarre and unheard of," the report noted.

Except for the southern state of Tamil Nadu, which reported the highest number incidents (52), most of the other incidents reported took place in central Indian states ruled by the BJP – Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party, which is known for

pursuing a Hindu-nationalist agenda.

The violence in Tamil Nadu, the report noted, has “a disturbing overlay of caste discrimination”. Victims generally come from the so-called “lower castes” in villages where the dominant groups object to prayer houses and even the entry of missionaries, it added.

In the states run by the BJP, which include Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, the reported said “the Sangh [Hindu nationalist] cadres have free hand, with the police and administration either looking the other way, or complicit”.

The report claimed that the criminal justice system at the village- and small towns-level “routinely ignores or violates provisions in the law” and said constitutional provisions for religious freedom, right to life and freedom needed to be “available to the poorest person in the most remote village”.

While focusing on the targeting of Christians, the report said the commission is “alive to the persecution of, and pressure on, other religious minorities, caste discrimination against Dalits, and the situation of women”.

The report accused some state governments and their heads of using public money “to denounce Christianity publicly”.

It warned that the political environment had begun “heating

up” ahead of general elections in spring 2019. “Foot soldiers of the BJP ... have shifted into high gear in hate campaigns and targeted violence against individuals and groups, mainly religious minorities and Dalits,” it added.

Statistics revealed in India’s parliament on 6 February confirmed a long-standing allegation by rights groups that religious-based violence is growing under the premiership of Narendra Modi.

The figures contradict the assertion by Alphons Kannanthanam, a member of the BJP and the first Indian Christian in Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s cabinet, who said: “There has not been even one instance when a church was burnt or Christians attacked anywhere in the country after Modi came to power,” Kannanthanam said.

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Authorities in Sudan Demolish Church Building in Khartoum

No notice given before bulldozers arrive two hours after service

Morning Star News (12.02.2018) – <http://bit.ly/2FikgqV> – Authorities in Sudan yesterday demolished a church building in North Khartoum, sources said.

The 64 members of the Evangelical Church in Al Haj Yousif in the Sudanese capital will have no place to worship next Sunday after land officials sent a bulldozer accompanied by police to tear down their building without prior notice, according to one of the church's leaders. Police on three trucks arrived at the church compound accompanied by a bulldozer just a few hours after the end of Sunday worship, the leader said.

"They took everything from the church," she said.

Officials told church leaders that the church was demolished because worship created public disturbances, but Christian leaders said the church sat on land that the government is helping a Muslim business interest to seize.

Leaders of the Evangelical Church in Al Haj Yousif said the Muslim who claims ownership of the church property has forged documents showing ownership. They said the church has owned the property since 1989, and that a judge last year verbally

confirmed its ownership.

With police at the ready in case of potential confrontations, the bulldozer began demolishing the structure by noon. Eyewitnesses said police confiscated chairs, tables and Bibles before the demolition.

One Christian called for rights organizations to pressure the Sudanese government to return the confiscated items.

“We urge all activists and human rights supporters around the world to denounce this move and demand for the return of the confiscated property of the church,” Christian activist Samaan Mahajoub wrote on his Facebook page on Sunday (Feb. 11).

A court dispute about ownership of the church site is still pending in court.

The Rev. Yahia Abdelrahim Nalu of the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church (SPEC) confirmed the demolition.

“These crazy actions will not stop us from praying and praising God!” he told Morning Star News. “God is Almighty.”

The incident has attracted widespread outrage among Christians in Sudan, with many saying it directly shows hatred of Christians.

In its campaign to rid the country of Christianity, Sudan has designated at least 25 church buildings for destruction, claiming they were built on government lands, Christian leaders said.

On Feb. 5 a court fined seven Christians for defending church properties.

Harassment, arrests and persecution of Christians have intensified since the secession of South Sudan in July 2011. The Sudanese Minister of Guidance and Endowments announced in April 2013 that no new licenses would be granted for building new churches in Sudan, citing a decrease in the South Sudanese population.

Sudan since 2012 has expelled foreign Christians and bulldozed church buildings on the pretext that they belonged to South Sudanese. Besides raiding Christian bookstores and arresting Christians, authorities threatened to kill South Sudanese Christians who do not leave or cooperate with them in their effort to find other Christians.

Sudan fought a civil war with the south Sudanese from 1983 to 2005, and in June 2011, shortly before the secession of South Sudan the following month, the government began fighting a rebel group in the Nuba Mountains that has its roots in South Sudan.

Due to its treatment of Christians and other human rights violations, Sudan has been designated a Country of Particular Concern by the U.S. State Department since 1999, and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended the country remain on the list in its 2017 report.

Sudan ranked fourth on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2018 World Watch List of countries where Christians face most persecution.

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