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Facebook censors a petition against forced marriage of Christian women and girls

Why did Facebook 'kill' charity's petition drive against the forced marriage of Christian women and girls?

By Shannon Mullen

Catholic News Agency (22.12.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3yZtvbb> - A Catholic charity says it's been censored and de-platformed by Facebook without explanation in connection with the group's recent petition drive calling for greater efforts to stop the abduction and forced conversion and marriage of Christian women and girls in Islamic countries.

London-based [Aid to the Church in Need UK](#) launched its campaign with a series of Facebook ads in early November. The organization's effort was held in conjunction with the release of its new report, titled "[Hear Her Cries](#)," which details the rampant and widely ignored abuse of women and girls who are Christians or members of other religious minority groups at the hands of Islamic extremists in Nigeria, Mozambique, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Pakistan.

Within a week, on Nov. 10, Facebook notified the charity that the social media giant was sharply curtailing the number of ads the group could post. The notice didn't specify a reason.

"This is because too many ads were hidden or reported for ad accounts associated with this business. People hide and report ads because they find them to be offensive, misleading, sexually inappropriate, violent, about a sensitive topic or for other reasons," the notice states.

This is the advertisement that Aid to the Church in Need UK posted on Facebook in support of the charity's petition drive to help women and girls who are abducted and forced to convert and marry Islamic men. Courtesy of Aid to the Church in Need UK
The charity says it also has lost access to the WhatsApp instant messaging platform and Instagram, both owned by Facebook.

Ever since the restrictions were imposed, Aid to the Church in Need UK says it has tried, without success, to get an explanation from Facebook. The closest the group has come to receiving a response was an email saying that the matter was being reviewed.

"We totally understand the urgency on this matter and how important this is for you, but such situations require a detailed investigation and solution, and considering the circumstances, we can not offer a time limit," reads the email, sent by "Alex" from "Facebook Concierge Support."

John Pontifex, the charity's head of press and information, told CNA that Facebook's action effectively "killed" the group's petition campaign, which wound up garnering 3,210 signatures. That total was about one-quarter of what the charity anticipated, based on the results of a prior petition drive, he said. Pontifex delivered the petitions on Dec. 15 to Fiona Bruce, a Member of Parliament who is Prime Minister Boris Johnson's special envoy for religious freedom.

In a statement, Neville Kyrke-Smith, national director of Aid to the Church in Need UK, blasted Facebook for its actions.

"We are horrified that our campaign which aims to help suffering women has been censored in such a draconian manner," he said.

"By claiming to have banned our advert for violating its guidelines, but refusing to say which guidelines or how, Facebook have made themselves judge, jury and executioner."

Kyrke-Smith went on to accuse Facebook of aiding and abetting the abuses the charity is trying to stop.

"By curbing this campaign, they are silencing these women twice over," he said. "They are silenced when they are seized from their homes and forced to live with their abductors, and have now been silenced again by Facebook."

Another human rights advocate focused on the problem of human trafficking and child marriage called Facebook's actions toward Aid to the Church in Need "troubling."

"Sadly, violence against women is a human rights abuse that transcends cultural, ethnic, and religious divides. Aid to the Church in Need's work to stop sexual violence against women unifies and amplifies the voices of religious minority groups spanning Hindu, Yazidi, and Christian communities," Laura Bramon Hassan, executive director of Philomena Project, told CNA.

"Facebook UK's decision to attack this coalition for highlighting the plight of one group is perplexing and troubling," she said.

Catholics fight for religious freedom

UCA News (29.10.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3nORIS9> - The battle between the underground and state-sanctioned churches continues in China after a bishop was detained for the sixth time.

Authorities in communist China have allegedly [kidnapped a Catholic bishop](#) who was previously arrested several times for refusing to break ties with the Vatican and join state-controlled church bodies.

Media reports said [Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin](#) of [Yongjia Diocese](#) in Zhejiang province in eastern China was detained and the reason for the detention and the whereabouts of the 58-year-old bishop remain unknown.

It is the sixth time Bishop Shao has been detained since 2016 following the death of his predecessor [Bishop Vincent Zhu Weifang](#). He was ordained as the coadjutor bishop of Yongjia in November 2011 with Vatican approval.

However, he fell out with the government as his appointment was not approved by two state-sanctioned church bodies — the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China and Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. Following his arrest in May 2017, he was detained for seven months.



Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin of Yongjia has been arrested several times by Chinese authorities. (Photo supplied)

Two Korean Catholic nuns are languishing in a jail in Nepal more than six weeks after police arrested them on [charges of conversion](#).

Sister Gemma Lucia Kim and Sister Martha Park Byongsuk of the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres congregation were arrested on September 14. They were kept in police custody until September 27 and sent to a district prison after bail was denied.



Sister Martha Park Byongsuk enjoys a midday meal with the children at St. Paul's Happy Home in Pokhara Bus-Park slum in Nepal. She and her companion have been detained over religious conversion charges. (Photo: globalsistersreport.org)

The nuns work among poor slum children in Pokhara, about 200 kilometers from capital Kathmandu. [Bishop Paul Simick](#), apostolic vicar of [Nepal](#), said the Catholic community was shocked over the arrest and bail denial of the elderly nuns. He said the allegation against the nuns is baseless and unjust.

Police also arrested two other Koreans — a lay Catholic and a Protestant pastor — on similar charges. Rights groups have documented increased hostility against Christians in Hindu-majority Nepal since it amended its Penal Code in 2018 to outlaw conversion.

Indian [Cardinal George Alencherry](#), head of the Syro-Malabar Church, is facing a federal probe on [money-laundering charges](#).

The anti-money laundering agency, Enforcement Directorate has launched an investigation into the sale of church land resulting in a loss of 10 million US dollars to the Archdiocese of Ernakulam-Angamaly in Kerala state.



Cardinal George Alencherry with Pope Francis. (Photo: Facebook)

A church official said the move is a part of a conspiracy to tarnish the church and its leader as a local court and a special police team cleared the cardinal of any wrongdoing.

In 2017, a group of priests in the archdiocese accused Cardinal Alencherry of bypassing church rules and selling off several plots of land at a massive financial loss. The Vatican also probed the cardinal and removed him from the post of archbishop, but he remains the head of the church.

Deadly [street violence](#) erupted in Muridke city of Pakistan as thousands of members of a radical Islamist party clashed with police. At least 10 people including three policemen have died since last week as some 7,000 supporters of TLP or Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan blocked roads.

The banned outfit is demanding the release of its leader Saad Hussain Rizvi and the expulsion of the French ambassador over cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. Rizvi was arrested in April and the TLP was banned following violent anti-France protests.



Bishop John Joseph (in glasses) with Christian protesters in Faisalabad in 1992. (Photo supplied)

The federal government has released about 350 TLP activists and announced cases against others would be withdrawn. In April, TLP held rallies for days, leaving roads paralyzed and six police officers dead in violent clashes.

Catholic lawyer Akmal Bhatti sparked a social media debate by asking whether minorities should follow TLP's example by protesting to stop rampant forced conversion of minority girls and women.

The international community has urged the [ASEAN](#) or Association of Southeast Asian Nations to take concrete action to hold Myanmar's military junta accountable to bring an end to the country's political crisis.

ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights made the appeal as it held a three-day summit with world leaders including US President Joe Biden with Myanmar top on the agenda. The 10-member ASEAN bloc barred Myanmar's military chief Min Aung Hlaing from attending the summit this week.



US President Joe Biden takes part in the ASEAN-US Summit on the sidelines of the 2021 ASEAN summit held online via a live video conference in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei. (Photo: AFP)

About 1,200 people have been killed by the junta since the coup in a bloody crackdown against anti-coup protesters and civil resistance groups in urban and rural areas.

Tens of thousands of people, including ethnic communities in Christian-majority states, have been displaced and thousands have fled to neighboring India and Thailand. Hundreds of economic migrants who fled to Thailand to evade endemic poverty have been arrested in recent weeks.

A court in Cambodia has [sentenced 10 youth activists](#) and four former supporters of Cambodia National Rescue Party or CNRP, a banned opposition political party, to 20 months to two years in jail.

The Phnom Penh Municipal Court found them guilty of incitement for demanding the release of jailed trade unionist and rights activist Rong Chhun. The court, however, acquitted retired Australian politician Hong Lim, who was tried in absentia on the same charges.



Prisoners including leaders of the Cambodian Confederation of Unions standing trial for alleged incitement arrive in a truck at Phnom Penh Municipal Court on Jan. 15. (Photo: AFP)

Hong Lim was banned from entering Cambodia in 2016 after criticizing authoritarian Prime Minister Hun Sen following the murder of Kem Ley, a close friend and prominent broadcaster who was shot dead in Phnom Penh.

Hun Sen's ruling Cambodia People's Party won every seat contested in the 2018 election, turning the nation into a one-party state. The CNRP was dissolved, its leader Sam Rainsy forced into exile and more than 100 activists arrested.

The Catholic Church in the Philippines has permanently [relieved three priests](#) from pastoral and priestly duties after they declared their intention to run for public office in elections next year.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCB) said on Tuesday that the decrees of sanction from respective diocesan bishops were sent to the trio, Father Noli Alparce of [Sorsogon Diocese](#), Father Emergon Luego of [Tagum Diocese](#) and Father Granwell Pitapit of [Libmanan Diocese](#).



Father Noli Alparce of Sorsogon Diocese celebrates Mass in this file photo. (Photo: Father Alparce)

The CBCB statement noted that the Church was obliged to act as canon law prohibits priests from assuming public office and participating in the exercise of civil power. Simultaneously, the priests were also stripped of their roles in various church agencies such as Caritas.

Father Alparce said he had filed his candidacy to run as a councilor in Albay province, while Father Luego quit the priesthood to run for mayor in Mabini, a town in Davao province.

A daughter of Indonesia's first president Soekarno has made headlines after she [converted to Hinduism](#) from Islam.

Diah Mutiara Sukmawati Soekarnoputri, the third daughter of Soekarno, officially became a Hindu on Tuesday during a ceremony in predominantly Hindu Bali province in the world's largest Muslim-majority country. The ceremony on her 70th birthday was held amid tight security in the presence of some 50 guests, mostly family members.



Diah Mutiara Sukmawati Soekarnoputri at the conversion ceremony at the Soekarno Center in Bali's Buleleng district on Oct. 26. (Photo: YouTube)

Media reports say Sukmawati, the founder of the Indonesian National Party and sister of the country's fifth president, Megawati Soekarnoputri, decided to become a Hindu because her Balinese grandmother had been a devotee. Sukmawati was accused of making "blasphemous" remarks about Islam in 2018.

Several groups complained to police over a poem she wrote and read during a fashion event that allegedly mocked Sharia law, the niqab face veil and the Muslim call to prayer. In 2019, she faced another police complaint for comparing her father with Prophet Muhammad.

Taiwan's government has [dismissed media reports](#) that the nation's relationship with the Vatican was under strain due to China's pressure. Taiwan and the Vatican continue to have a friendly relationship through sturdy communication channels, Ministry of Foreign Affairs said.

The response came a day after *Corriere della Sera*, Italy's most circulated newspaper, reported that Beijing wants the Vatican to break its diplomatic relationship with Taiwan in exchange for official ties with China. Taiwan is an independent and democratic nation but China still considers Taiwan as one of its provinces and has threatened to annex it militarily.



Anti-landing spikes placed along the coast of Taiwan's Kinmen islands, which lie just 3.2 kilometers from the mainland China coast (in background) in the Taiwan Strait. Self-ruled Taiwan has lived under the threat of a Chinese invasion since the two sides split at the end of a civil war in 1949. (Photo: AFP)

China's military pressure has intensified in recent weeks, with Taiwan claiming over 150 Chinese warplanes violated the nation's air defense zone amid rising fears of a Chinese invasion. Taiwan does not have sovereign status at the United Nations due to China's opposition.

However, it has diplomatic relations with 14 countries and maintains unofficial and economic relations with some 47 states. The Vatican is the only European state to have diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

Over 40 countries stand against anti-Semitism at the UN

Foref (06.10.2021) - <https://foref-europe.org/blog/2021/10/06/3298/> - During the current session of the UN Human Rights Council, Austria, along with the Czech Republic and Slovakia, issued a special statement denouncing antisemitism. The statement was signed by 43 other governments. The World Jewish Congress cooperated in gathering support for the statement.

Austrian Foreign Minister **Alexander Schallenberg** said in a video presentation that the Covid epidemic "has overshadowed many crises and has diverted our attention from critical developments such as rising antisemitism, intolerance and hatred." He said the fight against antisemitism needed to be joined by "anyone who believes in the values of equality, justice and liberty."

Austria's forthright move against hatred and prejudice against Jews comes at a time of growing recognition that demonization of State of Israel in the United Nations often reflects antisemitic motivations. No other UN member is more often singled out for condemnation in UN Human Rights Council and General Assembly resolutions, and other UN bodies, like UNESCO, do the same.

Hillel Neuer, director of the **NGO UN Watch**, tried to inform the Human Rights Council about antisemitic social media posts made by teachers working for the UN Relief and Works Agency. When he read actual quotes as evidence of this problem, his intervention was cut off by **President of the Council Nazhat Shameen Khan**. <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/unhrc-cuts-off-un-watch-for-quoting-antisemitic-posts-by-unrwa-teachers-680891>

Indeed, the UN's treatment of the world's only Jewish state is a scandal and an embarrassment to multilateralism. Since its formation in 2006, the **UN Human Rights Council** has never passed a resolution condemning China, or any against Cuba, Saudi Arabia or Pakistan. Yet during this period the Council has passed 95 resolutions condemning Israel. Likewise, since 2015, the UN General Assembly has condemned Israel 112 times, but has never passed a resolution criticizing China or Cuba. At the Human Rights Council, no other UN member is subjected to mandatory negative examination as is Israel with Agenda Item 7.

When introducing the session during the current Council meeting, **UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet** said she was "honored" to present a series of reports; each of those reports is biased and politicized, full of dubious charges against the Jewish state. An effort by the US government to get rid of Article 7 as a key element of reforming the Council, led by Ambassadors Nikki Haley and Kelley Currie under the Trump administration, got nowhere.

No one should deny that serious human rights problems exist in the West Bank, or that improvements in realizing the rights of Arab citizens in Israel could be made. But the territorial dispute between Israel and the Palestinians is but one of a number of such disputes around the world. Yet it lands on the front pages of media almost every day, and given disproportionate attention, reflecting an obsession with the Jewish state, especially in European countries historically plagued with antisemitism. Major human rights groups like Human Rights Watch have contributed exaggerated and libelous claims, such as that Israel is an "apartheid state." They only serve to convince the Israeli people that they have no chance that their precarious security problems will be understood in the international community. Perhaps these incendiary charges even incite violence.

The Austrian government is to be commended for standing against rising global antisemitism, which is affecting Austrian society itself. Antisemitism is a long-standing problem in Austria, and in 2020 antisemitic crimes reached record levels. Crimes targeting Jews are rising in most Western countries. Antisemitic beliefs and attitudes appear to be moving toward mainstream legitimacy, fueled by ideological extremism and conspiracy theories from both the left and right. It is thus good that numerous states (see list below) joined the statement by Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. We can only wonder why many more have not joined it. We hope more will.

Signatories to Austria's statement, according to the Jerusalem Post:

- **Israel**
- **Germany**
- **the United States**

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina**
- **Honduras, Montenegro**
- **North Macedonia**
- **Bulgaria**
- **Australia**
- **the United Kingdom**
- **Greece**
- **Belgium**
- **Cyprus**
- **Ukraine**
- **Cameroon**
- **Japan**
- **Slovenia**
- **Argentina**
- **Armenia**
- **Croatia**
- **Finland**
- **New Zealand**
- **Guatemala**
- **Colombia**
- **Chile**
- **Poland**
- **Moldova**
- **the Netherlands**
- **Latvia**
- **Romania**
- **Seychelles**
- **Lithuania**
- **Estonia, Uruguay,**
- **Norway**
- **and Sweden.**

Related Link:

[**Austria leads 47 nations in pledge at UNHRC to combat antisemitism**](#) (Jerusalem Post)

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Photo : *Dr. Aaron Rhodes, President of FOREF Europe*

Church numbers in the World



[GianPaolo Salvini, SJ](#) / [Mission](#)

Civiltà Catholica (26.09.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3CN2SqW> - The vitality of the Church and, above all, the faith that animates her pastors and her faithful cannot be measured by numbers and statistics. Only God knows the mysterious and unique relationship that unites him to people who profess themselves Catholic. This is what constitutes the essence of the faith.

Yet the Church, like every visible human reality, cannot live outside the dimensions of space and time and should not refrain measuring her own quantitative dimensions in some way, without expecting them to convey more than they can offer. For this reason the Central Office of Statistics of the Church has edited the Pontifical Yearbook 2020 and the *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae* 2018.

First, we report some statistics that help to form an idea of the changes that have occurred in the dimensions of the Church itself and its members. The comparisons were made between 2013 and 2018, that is, for the first 5 years of the pontificate of Pope Francis.

In terms of new structures, we see, as of 2019, 4 bishoprics, 1 eparchy, 2 territorial prelatures, 1 apostolic exarchate and 1 area of apostolic administration.

The number of bishops in the world has increased from 5,173 to 5,377 (3.9 percent). The biggest increases (more than 4 percent) were in Oceania, the Americas, Asia and Europe, while in Africa they increased 1.4 percent.

With regard to baptized Catholics, between 2013 and 2018 there has been a reduction in the relative numbers in European and North American countries and an increase in all other geographical areas. Catholics in the world in those years increased by almost 6 percent, from 1.254 billion to 1.329 billion, an increase of 75 million. At the end of 2018 Catholics made up just under 18 percent of the world population. This percentage has remained almost unchanged over the years surveyed. To be more precise, the highest percentage is found in the Americas, with 63.7 Catholics per 100 inhabitants, followed by Europe with 39.7 Catholics per 100 inhabitants, Oceania with 26.3 and Africa with 19.4. The lowest incidence is that of Asia (3.3 Catholics per 100 inhabitants), due to the significant number of non-Christian believers on this continent.

The distribution of Catholics among the various continents differs greatly from that of the population. In the Americas, for example, the population continues to be around 13.5

percent of the world total, while the number of Catholics has decreased by one percentage point, dropping to 48.3 percent of the world's Catholic population. The number of Catholics in Asia has grown slightly – from 10.9 to 11.1 percent – but is much lower than the continent's population (about 60 percent in 2018). Europe yields a population count 4 points lower than that of the Americas (9.6 percent), but its percentage in the Catholic world is lower than that of American countries (21.5 compared to 48.3 percent).

The number of priests decreased by 0.3 percent during this five year period, confirming a trend already underway. Between 2013 and 2018, priestly numbers increased by 1,400 in the first two years, and then decreased in the following three years. At the end of 2017, there were 414,582 priests. Encouragingly, they increased in Africa (+14.3 percent) and Asia (+11 percent). In America they remained constant (about 123,000). They decreased in Europe (-7 percent) and Oceania (-1 percent). The distribution of priests in the various continents sees a prevalence of European priests (41.3 percent), whose numbers have decreased greatly in the last three years, followed by American priests. The Asian clergy make up 16.5 percent of the total, the African clergy 11.5 percent and that of Oceania 1.1 percent .

A rapidly evolving reality in all continents is that of permanent deacons, who rose from 43,195 in 2013 to 47,504 in 2018, an increase of about 10 percent.

On the other hand, the number of professed non-priest religious has continued to decrease over the years, and from 2013 to 2018 it decreased by almost 8 percent, from 55,000 to less than 51,000. The exceptions are Africa and Asia, where there has been a certain increase.

With regard to the major seminarians there is also a tendency toward a slow decrease. Candidates for the priesthood in the world decreased by 2 percent in the period considered, from 118,251 in 2013 to 115,880 in 2018, with strong decreases in Europe (-15.6 percent) and The Americas (-9.4 percent). The continent that shows an encouraging opposite trend is Africa (+15.6 percent).

The drop in the number of professed nuns is cause for concern. They have decreased by 7.5 percent in the 5 years considered. The total number has decreased from 694,000 in 2013 to less than 642,000 in 2018. The decline concerns Europe, Oceania and The Americas, with decreases between -15 percent and -12 percent. On the other hand, there were increases of +9 percent in Africa and +2.6 percent in Asia, so that the relative percentages of European and American religious decreased in the total numbers.

Some considerations

We have limited ourselves to a few numerical data, from which, however, we can conclude as to some trend lines.

The number of bishops is increasing, both because of the desire to make the Church more Catholic, that is, universal, by creating official structures in every corner of the world, and to make their bishops closer to the faithful.

With the exception of Africa – whose Catholicism is younger and more dynamic – and Asia, the number of priests and nuns is constantly decreasing in the regions of “old” Christianity. These are, among other things, the ever more secularized continents, such as Europe and North America, where the number of practicing faithful is decreasing, and so there are fewer vocations. In any case, from the point of view of pastoral activity there is a clear shift toward Africa and Asia as the Church's increasingly vibrant “new” lands.

The rapid growth in the number of permanent deacons could be an indicator of the direction in which to seek new pastoral leaders. For some time now there has been lively

discussion about the causes of the crisis in religious life. One element giving rise to reflection concerns the need to assign new responsibilities in the Church to women religious, whose enormous and vital contribution is not matched by suitable representation in the Church's core structures. There will, however, always be vocations to an alternative form of religious commitment, such as the cloistered life.

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Strategies for religious freedom in fragile states, a USCIRF hearing

Special focus on Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen

By Dr Zsuzsa-Anna Ferenczy for *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (23.09.2021) - On September 22, the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom \(USCIRF\)](#) held a hearing to discuss strategies for religious freedom in fragile states.

The online event explored the intersection of religious freedom and fragility, the tools that the US government has to promote freedom of religion or belief abroad, the role that religious leaders and communities can play in strengthening stabilization efforts, and how the US government can better help protect religious freedom in fragile states.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan US federal government commission created by the 1998 [International Religious Freedom Act \(IRFA\)](#). USCIRF uses international standards to monitor violations of religious freedom or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

The panel included

Dr. Elie Al Hindy, Executive Director of Adyan Foundation, a Lebanon-based foundation for diversity, solidarity and human dignity,

Corinne Graff, senior advisor at the US Institute of Peace,

James Patton, CEO and President of the International Center for Religions and Diplomacy and

Prof. Ebrahim Moosa who co-directs Contending Modernities, the global research and education initiative examining the interaction among Catholic, Muslim, and other religious and secular forces in the world.

In 2018 the US government published the [Stabilization Assistance Review \(SAR\)](#) in the context of recent efforts undertaken by the US government to revise its approach to addressing violence and conflict prevention in fragile contexts. [The Global Fragility Act](#) was passed and signed into law with strong bipartisan support in 2019. These developments require long-term planning and organizational discipline across US foreign policy interagency processes and facilitate reflections on how religious freedom can advance US stabilization efforts and how US policy in fragile states can better support individuals whose rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and worship are under threat.

Countries with fragile contexts, such as **Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen** present uniquely challenging landscapes for US government officials to promote and protect religious freedom. When governments lack control over their territory or the support of their populations, common tools like diplomacy or sanctions often prove

ineffective in promoting the fundamental rights of freedom of religion or belief. In this spirit, in his opening remarks, **Nury Turkel**, USCIRF Vice Chair, stressed the urgency of thinking creatively on how to implement strategies and help to cement religious freedom norms.

Elie Al Hindy warned that the world has dismissed religion and identity politics too early; we thought extreme secularism and globalization could help unite people. In reality, this did not occur. Globalization did not solve identity-caused conflicts, but rather turned them into international concerns to be addressed collectively. Al Hindy presented several recommendations to strengthen the US approach to secure religious freedom in fragile states.

First, promote inclusive citizenship, adapted to the reality of each country. While equal dignity and the respect of basic rights of all must be the essence of every solution, this is not sufficient. Solutions must be based on the respect of religious identity. If people's attachment to their faith is neglected, there is a high probability of radicalization. Second, promote alternative religious narratives. There are significant efforts ongoing to promote tolerance, but we are far from reaching the point where moderate discourse is the mainstream. We must help introduce new narratives in religious schools across the world.

Third, promote the religious social responsibility of religious institutions and rehumanize religion. Dialogue is needed for reconciliation in refugee camps, to work together to address social, economic and ethical challenges. Fourth, promote state building by working with moderate voices and respecting the different religions and traditions locally, with the ultimate aim of preventing fragile states from turning into failed states.

Corinne Graff warned that persistent conflicts simmer around the world. The impact of global climate change will exacerbate these trends. We therefore need new approaches. Religious discrimination can lead communities to take up arms, but at the same time conflict can lead to religious discrimination, as seen in Myanmar. It is important to conduct more analysis to see how freedom of religion or belief impacts peace and vice versa.

As COVID continues to spread, its full impact on these complex relations are still unknown. We need an inclusive approach, with civil society, faith-based leaders, women and the youth. They must be involved in policy formulation and implementation. It is crucial to foster local leadership at all levels, because "the more ownership, the more sustainable the strategy is", Graff stressed. Finally, it is policy innovation that is needed to better adapt to the changing context, and the Global Fragility Act offers a good opportunity, a point also stressed by **James Patton**. He urged more research to better understand the complex link between restrictions on FORB and social instability.

"FORB is not universally accepted in the world", **Ebrahim Moosa** stressed. In fragile states the concept of freedom is contested and often subordinate to religious claims. "FORB is not a goal to be achieved, but part of a social good that flourishing societies generate", he explained. We need deep knowledge of local ecologies to support FORB by empowering indigenous thinking, rooted in tradition, to further embed values of coexistence into local communities. This is the only effective way to gain trust and advance interests of multiple communities. Professor Moosa called for more attention to local power dynamics. In this light, he stressed the need to, first, strengthen US policy on religious literacy reach out to non-typical actors, namely rural people, women, who "can tell us also what we don't want to hear"; second, ensure conflict-sensitive work with faith-based organizations in fragile states, and three, enhance the local and contextual understanding.

The panelists shared the assessment that local voices and nuances are crucial in fragile states. A sustainable approach must let the process grow organically, rather than being prescriptive. We must have an idea of what religious freedom is, but we first have to build trust with all those involved on the ground, and let the locals help us understand the local nuances. Access to religious leaders who are empowered in their countries and have influence is key. Considering that fragile states always present a complex context, an inclusive approach mindful of local traditions, values and diversity, as well as a creative and innovative policy approach will be indispensable going forward.

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Photo: Zsuzsa-Anna Ferenczy

The situation of persecuted Christians and the Hungarian Help in 2020

By Tristan Azbej, State Secretary of the Prime Minister's Office for the Aid of Persecuted Christians and for the Hungary Helps Program

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Helping persecuted Christians: Humanitarian assistance and supporting international rehabilitation efforts

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HRWF (26.04.2021) - *Human Rights Without Frontiers* is re-publishing a part of this 10-page article which is one of the contributions to the Budapest Report on Christian Persecution 2020. The full article can be read [here](#), pp 17-27.

Hungary's achievements in 2020

Since its establishment in 2016, the State Secretariat of the Prime Minister's Office for the Aid of Persecuted Christians and the Implementation of the Hungary Helps Program has distributed 13.4 billion HUF (about 43 million USD) for various projects which

supported local communities in 21 countries. These funds helped at least 100,000 people to either stay in their homeland or to return there.

A Scholarship Program for Christian Youth was established to enable persecuted and discriminated

Christian youth, who are often excluded from higher education in their home countries, to study in Hungarian colleges and universities and then use the skills they learned in Hungary at home. Young scholars from three continents are eligible for this scholarship which is awarded in collaboration with several church partners.

Projects implemented with Hungarian funding have directly contributed to the improvement of 13 out of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals and have been selected according to the humanitarian principles as defined by OCHA (humanity, neutrality, impartiality, independence). In 2020, Hungary continued to work internationally for joint action because too much political correctness can often hide the true extent of the suffering of Christian communities. Thus, the Government of Hungary responded actively to meet Christians' urgent requests for help and provide real assistance to local communities.

An example of Hungary's active solidarity is the reconstruction of the Iraqi Christian settlement of Tell Askuf, where St George's Church, five schools, a local kindergarten and nearly 1,000 demolished or damaged residential properties were rebuilt between 2017 and 2018.

In 2020, several further projects were launched or implemented in aid of persecuted Christians around the world, following the rationale of the Hungarian model.

The Hungarian Government intends to respond to the multifaceted challenges of the growing persecution of Christians in Africa by supporting similarly complex projects. In 2020, in Kenya we launched four different support plans that exemplify Hungary's diverse approaches to assistance. Project proposals prepared by the Archdiocese of Nyer include the establishment of a youth centre, the development of the educational infrastructure of St Paul Seminary, the construction of a new annexe to an existing dormitory, and the development of the existing infrastructure in King Christ Seminary. A project proposal from Tangaza Catholic University wants to develop peace building training in the border counties of Kenya through interfaith dialogue. Projects designed by the St Joseph the Worker Catholic Church in Nairobi include several sub-tasks like setting up a shelter in Westlands County for survivors of gender-based violence, providing academic and vocational scholarships and assist 209 women and girls in urban farming. Finally, the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT) projects support the establishment of basic health care facilities in the Biliqo Bulesa nature reserve and a few other infrastructure development activities.

The coronavirus situation has pushed hundreds of fragile communities to the brink of starvation, including thousands of Christian families. In response to an urgent request, the Hungarian Government provide emergency assistance to the suffering Armenian Apostolic and other Christian communities in Lebanon and Pakistan. The Hungarian Government also provided 1 million Euros as emergency funding to the Maronite Catholic Church in Lebanon in the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion, so that they can save lives, carry out relief efforts and rebuild the damaged infrastructure. This donation reached Lebanon within two days.

The pandemic has led to mass job losses in Palestine and Jordan. As a result, 12,456 students in 38 schools operated by the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem are unable to pay their tuition fees, which creates such a huge deficit in the budget of these schools that it

threatens the future of the affected institutions. The total financial loss amounts to more than 7 million USD. Urgent action is needed to save these schools, which will support the survival of local Christian communities as well.

In March 2020, illegal immigrants on Lesbos damaged several chapels, including the local church of St George. As the Greek community in Hungary maintains close ties with the motherland, the National Council of Greeks in Hungary and the Parliamentary Advocate of the Greek Minority asked the Hungarian Government for a 10 million HUF contribution donation for the restoration of these churches. By supporting this project, the Hungarian Government contributed to the preservation of universal Christian culture and values. Hungarian support also enabled the implementation of other projects throughout the year. For example, Hungarian donations enabled the successful completion of the construction of the "The First Miracle of the Lord" School Centre in Kana, Galilee. The State Secretariat also assisted the activities of the Roads of Success, an organisation that collects and processes evidence of genocide perpetrated by the Islamic State.

Finally, Hungary supported the efforts of the Archdiocese of Dhakka to build housing for indigenous Adivasi Christian families.

Budapest Report on Christian Persecution 2020

HRWF (26.04.2021) - The Budapest Report on Christian Persecution 2020 (437 pages) has just been published this month and is available in Hungarian and English. [You can read it here.](#)

The numerous contributions to this report present the persecution of Christians in different regions of the world from the point of view of security policy, history, fundamental rights, and public law, among others. The studies of this new volume are organized into three main themes. In addition to the regional presentation of acts of violence against Christian communities, the volume also deals with the phenomenon and its international legal aspects in a general, theoretical context, as well as the role of state and church organizations in solving the problem.

You can also watch the roundtable discussions in Hungarian (sub-titles in English) about the new volume [here.](#)

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Survey on the state of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) worldwide

The [survey](#) is part of a planning grant from the Templeton Religion Trust - Call for participation

The survey, which should only take 15 minutes to complete, is divided into multiple parts, covering:

1. Government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion.
2. Social, cultural, and economic issues and whether religious freedom/FORB can be promoted through joint initiatives (e.g., Religious Freedom & Business Foundation).
3. Your thoughts on the efficacy of multi-faith-and-belief IRF/FORB Roundtables in advancing religious freedom/FORB in your country and region.
4. Your thoughts on "Conventional Pluralism", defined as the obligation, responsibility, and intentional pledge to engage based on respect and protection of the other's liberty of conscience. More than tolerance, covenantal pluralism entails the responsibility to engage, respect, and protect people of all faiths, and people of no faith, without necessarily lending moral equivalency to their beliefs and behavior.
5. Finally, your thoughts on other key concepts, such as "Human Dignity, Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms" being useful frameworks for religious freedom/FORB.

Your participation in this survey is voluntary and your responses will be kept confidential. You are not required to answer any question, but we do ask at the start that you identify the country for which you are basing your responses. Also, other information we ask at the conclusion of the survey about your organization's work is very helpful in mapping the array of people and organizations engaged in advancing religious freedom/FORB worldwide.

Background

The survey is part of a planning grant from the Templeton Religion Trust and will be used to solicit information and advice on the best ways to reverse the rising tide of restrictions on and hostilities involving religion.

Our aim is to gather information by surveying at least 1,000 current and former government leaders and parliamentarians, faith and civil society leaders, experts in the fields of religion, religious literacy, freedom of religion or belief, security, counterterrorism, peacebuilding, and international and economic development, including sector-specific experts from business, education, and healthcare.

We are looking for your ideas on the "how-to" of cooperative engagement and coordination of actions across the global networks of religious freedom roundtables, governments, parliamentarians, and societal sectors such as business. Thank you for your help in advancing international religious freedom!

Warm regards,

Brian Grim, Ph.D.

President, Religious Freedom & Business Foundation
Executive Director, IRF Business Roundtable

Greg Mitchell

Chair, IRF Secretariat and IRF Roundtable

Aid to the Church in Need 2021 report on religious freedom in the world has been published in five languages

GLOBAL ANALYSIS

By Dr. Marcela Szymanski

ACN (22.04.2021) - <https://rfr.acninternational.org/home/> - While the loss of fundamental rights such as religious freedom can occur suddenly, for example through conflict and war, in many cases it is not an overnight event; it is often a process of erosion that occurs over years. Like individual tiles of a roof being blown away one by one – or a few at a time – by increasingly strong winds, the observer ultimately recognises that there is no longer any cover, and he or she is exposed to the winds. These winds take the form of authoritarian governments, transnational terrorist networks, or fundamentalist religious leaders goading lynch mobs.

The reasons for the erosion of the right to religious freedom are manifest, but it can also occur as a result of the friction created by the introduction of new laws and regulations that, having identified religion as part of the problem, gradually force religious identities out of the public space. The state, as the guardian of the law, is obliged to enable the individual to “manifest his religion or belief in public or private”^[1], keeping the public sphere open for all religions, and for those without religion. Without these state

protections, however, the inalienable human right becomes vulnerable, and risks disappearing.

Based on our evaluation of the country reports and regional analyses, a map highlights where the protections to religious freedom are almost all gone (countries in red); where these protections are under threat (countries in orange); and – with a new classification, “under observation” – where newly emerging factors of concern have been observed potentially endangering the individual’s right to freedom of religion.

Hindsight, regrettably, confirms the aforementioned observations. Signs of religious freedom violations observed in our 2018 report accelerated and expanded to the current situation, where systematic and egregious attacks are coming from governments, whether China or North Korea, as well as international terror groups, such as Boko Haram or the so-called Islamic State and other fundamentalist groups. These problems have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. States have used the insecurity to increase control over their citizens, and non-state actors have taken advantage of the confusion to recruit, expand and provoke wider humanitarian crises.

The two-year period under review, however, has also revealed significant progress especially in interreligious dialogue, as well as the increasingly important role of religious leaders in the mediation and resolution of hostilities and war.

Extreme persecution (Map: countries marked in red)

Close to four billion people live in the 26 countries classified as suffering the most intense violations of religious freedom. They comprise just over half (51 percent) of the world’s population.

Almost half of these countries are in Africa. In Sub-Saharan Africa, populations have historically been divided between farmers and nomadic cattle herders, occasionally experiencing outbreaks of violence resulting from long-simmering ethnic and resource-based conflicts – more recently exacerbated by climate change, growing poverty and attacks by armed criminal gangs. Notwithstanding these, for the most part, communities and different faith groups have lived together in relative peace. Within the last decade, however, violence has erupted across the region with unimaginable ferocity.

This paroxysm of conflict released the pent-up frustration of generations upon generations of disenfranchised youthful populations who have suffered poverty, corruption and poor educational and work opportunities. These frustrations, in turn, provided fuel for the rise of armed groups including Islamist militants, both local, and more recently foreign – transnational jihadist groups engaged in a targeted, systematic persecution of all those, Muslims and Christians alike, who do not accept the extreme Islamist ideology. Over the last two years, jihadist groups have consolidated their presence in Sub-Saharan Africa and the region has become a haven for over two dozen actively operating – and increasingly cooperating – groups in 14 countries, including affiliates of the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. The development of these affiliates has occurred within an alarmingly short timeframe, and the pattern is familiar. Attacks by local criminal gangs, spurred on by Salafi jihadist preachers, progress from the sporadic and arbitrary to the ideological and targeted. In certain cases, a gang’s efforts culminate in a sinister distinction – “affiliation” as a province of a so-called caliphate of a transnational Islamist network **(see the Africa Backgrounder)**.

Millions have fled the conflict regions, either as internally displaced persons or as refugees into neighbouring countries. Serious human rights violations have been reported, with women and children often the victims. Millions of people in Sub-Saharan Africa face destitution, with the forced abandonment of fields and traditional small businesses. Starvation then ensues as armed groups impede access to humanitarian aid; women and children are enslaved, and the men are forcibly recruited into the ranks of the extremists. As evidenced in the country reports, in nations like Burkina Faso, according to the World Health Organization, by the end of 2020 more than 60 percent of the territory was not accessible to humanitarian aid workers.

Governments are either unable or, in some cases apparently, unwilling to address the issue. Considerably better equipped than the local armed forces, the jihadist militias fund their activities through kidnapping, pillaging, and the illicit trafficking of humans, precious minerals and drugs. Only recently have multi-national task forces been established to help the local governments **(see the Regional Analysis and Africa Backgrounder)**.

While religious freedom in Africa suffers from intercommunal and jihadist violence, in Asia the persecution of religious groups stems mainly from Marxist dictatorships. In China and North Korea, which are the worst offenders in the red category, religious freedom is non-existent, as are the majority of human rights.

In North Korea, no fundamental human rights are acknowledged and the regime targets any group that challenges the personality cult of Kim Jong-un's rule – although the treatment of Christians is particularly severe. In this regard, the regime can be defined as "exterminationist".

Of China's population of 1.4 billion, almost 900 million self-identify as adherents of some form of spirituality or religion, and state control is relentless. Mass surveillance, including artificial intelligence-refined technology, a social credit system that rewards and punishes individual behaviour, and brutal crackdowns on religious and ethnic groups, enforce the state supremacy. As the Regional Analysis reveals, "the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has one the most pervasive and effective state-run engines of religious control currently in operation anywhere in the world." This is particularly evident through mass internment and coercive "re-education programs" affecting more than a million, mostly Muslim, ethnic Uyghurs in Xinjiang Province **(see the China Backgrounder)**. Although there are approximately 30 million Muslims in China, including some 13 million Uyghurs adhering to a Sunni branch of Islam **(see the Fact Box on Branches of Islam)**, rather than trying to protect fellow believers, some Sunni Muslim nations instead cooperate with the Chinese authorities by deporting back Uyghurs seeking refuge. Out of all UN member countries, only the United States and Canada have described China's actions as genocide. Myanmar (Burma) has also, over the period under review, lurched towards the worst crime against humanity, namely genocide. Ongoing assaults against Christians and Hindus in Kachin State have been cast into the shadows by a massive, multi-phased attack by the military and other armed groups against the mostly Muslim Rohingya population in Rakhine State. Systematically driven into neighbouring Bangladesh, an estimated one million Rohingyas are sheltering in camps and are subject to sickness, squalor, sexual abuse and murder. In contrast to China, the government of Myanmar has been ordered by the International Court of Justice to implement measures to prevent genocide, while an investigation proceeds.

Alongside religious restrictions imposed by Marxist dictatorships and military regimes, a grave challenge to religious freedom in Asia comes from increasing groundswell movements of ethno-religious nationalism. Perhaps the most explicit example of this is India, home to a nearly 1.4 billion majority Hindu population, though with significant populations of religious minorities including Muslims and Christians. With an underperforming economic sector and a need to bolster votes, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (or BJP) projects an increasingly nationalist vision intended to resonate with the majority population, namely that India is inherently Hindu. India is not alone. The trend affects billions in this continent, predominantly in democratic or semi-democratic contexts favouring the rise of the majoritarian religious nationalism in Muslim-majority Pakistan, Hindu-majority Nepal, and Buddhist-majority Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and Bhutan **(see the Mainland Asia Regional Analysis and the Backgrounder on Ethno-Religious Nationalism)**.

Common to all of the countries indicated in red, but most evident in Pakistan, is the profound impact on the most vulnerable – women and girls of the "wrong religion" who are abducted, raped, and obliged to change their faith in so-called forced conversions. As minorities and thus *de facto* second-class citizens, they stand little to no chance of obtaining justice and redress, despite the fact that they are victims of crimes punishable

under common law. The rights of these girls and women are so comprehensively denied that they become slaves – sex workers and manual labourers **(see the Pakistan Case Study and the country reports on Nigeria and India)**.

Severe cases of violation (Map: countries marked in orange)

1.24 billion people live in the 36 countries where full religious freedom is neither enjoyed, nor constitutionally guaranteed. These countries include 16 percent of all the people in the world.

Countries where conditions worsened, entering the classification of 'orange' during the period under review, are predominantly those which have passed laws which provide for unequal treatment of religious groups. Illusions of newfound freedoms in the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolts in North Africa and the Levant countries (in 2010-2012) faded as governments increasingly applied already restrictive laws to assert their power, control the dominant ideology and tighten their grip on religious leaders. Nations such as Algeria, Tunisia and Turkey function as "hybrid pseudo-democracies" which allow for electoral processes, but strictly control who is eligible to run for office, how long they may remain in office and the ability to modify re-election laws to their benefit **(see the Middle East and North Africa Regional Analysis)**.

During the period under review, President Erdogan put aside Ataturk's laicism and introduced a neo-Ottoman foreign policy positioning Turkey as a global Sunni power. As exemplified by the conversion of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul into a mosque, Islam is promoted in every aspect of public life. Internationally, Erdogan has pursued military interventions in Libya, Syria, northern Iraq, and in the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkey has also sought influence, and impacted religious freedom, in Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo and Cyprus **(see the corresponding country reports and Middle East and North Africa Regional Analysis)**.

In over a dozen countries which enjoy normal, even friendly, relations with the West, being a non-Muslim now carries a higher risk than in the previous period reviewed. States in the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and the former Soviet countries and neighbouring nations, have passed laws aimed at preventing the expansion of what they consider foreign religions, and also barring "non-traditional Islam". Freedom of worship is guaranteed but not full religious freedom. For example, in some states, apostasy from the state or majoritarian religion is punishable – sometimes by death. In countries where conversion from the majority religion is not forbidden by law, it is effectively forbidden as a consequence of strong societal pressures. In many of these countries, proselytism of people belonging to the state religion is illegal. As the Middle East and North Africa Regional Analysis attests: laws against blasphemy silence minority faith groups; societal tolerance towards Christians continues to be low; and, as numerous incidents in Upper Egypt confirm, violence can erupt any time.

A positive development in the period under review is the rapprochement between Christians and Muslims led by Pope Francis. Following his meeting with the Grand Imam Ahamad Al-Tayyib of Al-Azar, the leader of the Sunni Muslim world, in 2019, the two religious leaders met again in 2020 in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to co-sign the Abu Dhabi Declaration on Human Fraternity. This papal visit to the UAE was marked by the first ever celebration of a papal Mass on the Arabian Peninsula. The 2021 visit of Pope Francis to Iraq – his first to a Shia majority country – will hopefully deepen interreligious dialogue and help highlight the dire situation of religious minorities in Iraq and beyond **(see the corresponding country reports and Middle East and North Africa Regional Analysis)**.

The COVID-19 pandemic upended traditional practices around the world in areas such as health care, governance, and the economy, often with profound implications for human rights including that of religious freedom. As the COVID-19 Backgrounder reveals, in less

developed areas of the world, the illness not only revealed underlying societal weaknesses, but exacerbated existing fragilities resulting from poverty, corruption, and vulnerable state structures. Terrorist groups and Islamist extremists, for example in Africa, took advantage of the government distraction to increase their violent attacks, entrench territorial gains and recruit new members. Pre-existing societal prejudices against minority religious communities also led to increased discrimination, for example in Pakistan where Muslim charities denied Christians and members of minority faith groups access to food and medical aid. In the West, emergency measures taken in response to the pandemic impacted freedom of assembly and religious freedom, prompting criticism and debate **(see the Backgrounder on COVID-19)**.

Countries under observation (Map: marked on Regional Analysis maps)

A new category has been introduced in this report, countries “under observation”, where newly emerging factors have been observed which provoke concerns about negative impacts on freedom of religion.

This category is most tangibly illustrated through an increase in hate crimes, with a religious bias, against people and property. These range from vandalism of places of worship and religious symbols including mosques, synagogues, statues and cemeteries, to violent crimes against faith leaders and religious believers **(see the OSCE Regional Analysis)**. A United Nations initiative to protect places of worship launched in September 2019 had no effect on violent demonstrations in Latin America where protestors in anti-government demonstrations attacked and destroyed religious symbols and property **(see the Chile Case Study)**.

In what Pope Francis has defined as “polite persecution”, we observe the rise of new “rights”, new cultural norms created according to evolving values, which consign religions “to the quiet obscurity of the individual’s conscience or relegates them to the enclosed precincts of churches, synagogues or mosques.” For example, in the West, the right to conscientious objection on religious grounds for health care professionals in relation to issues concerning abortion and euthanasia is no longer meaningfully protected in law. Graduates from particular confessional universities are increasingly denied access to certain professions. Provisions for the right of religious groups to run their own schools according to their own ethos are also in jeopardy in several countries. These new rights, enshrined in law, result in an individual’s rights to freedom of conscience and religion coming into a profound conflict with the legal obligation to comply with these laws **(see the Backgrounders on “Polite Persecution” and “A Precious Asset”: the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief)**. This dissonance has already had, and will continue to have, a strong impact on over 84 percent of the world’s population, who, according to the Pew Research Center^[2], describe themselves as adhering to a religion or belief.

ENDNOTES

^[1] “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”, United Nations, 1948; <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

^[2] “Religion: why faith is becoming more and more popular”, The Guardian, 27th August 2018; <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/27/religion-why-is-faith-growing-and-what-happens-next>

When will the World Respond to Jihadi Violence in Africa?

By Lela Gilbert

Newsweek (17.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2OXRUuZ> - Africa has long been a dream destination for intrepid globe trotters. Generations of adventurous souls have embarked on safaris, explored vast savannas and photographed exotic wildlife. Colorful cultural traditions and ethnic foods have added to the continent's allure. Nowadays, however, international reports are casting worrisome shadows across Africa, especially for those of us who focus on international religious freedom.

Last November, shocking news stories reported that ISIS was attacking civilians in Mozambique, abducting women and children and torching homes. Al Jazeera described innocent people—many of them Catholics—being "herded" to their death on a soccer field, where they were systematically decapitated and dismembered. On March 10, the Associated Press announced, "The Biden administration on Wednesday designated two Islamic State affiliates in Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo as 'foreign terrorist organizations,' imposing wide-ranging sanctions on the groups."

In September, a private email reported that a Christian family had been jailed in Somalia. The captives' crime? They had converted to Christianity and were accused of evangelizing. Several similar arrests have followed.

Likewise, Burkina Faso has been the scene of immense carnage and the displacement of more than a million Christians. The Washington Post described an evening when "gunmen stormed a village in northern Burkina Faso and ordered people who had been chatting outside to lie down. Then the armed strangers checked everyone's necks, searching for jewelry. They found four men wearing crucifixes—Christians. They executed them."

All across Africa's vast expanse, one nation after another has suffered extreme violence, from killings and mutilations to kidnappings and disappearances. As far as religious freedom is concerned, Christian communities are at highest risk because of the marauding jihadis' religious ideology.

The Guardian reported in January that more than 340 million Christians—one in eight across the world—face high levels of persecution and discrimination. The number of Christians killed for their faith increased by 60 percent over the previous year. More than 90 percent of those deaths were in Africa.

In late February 2021, the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (JCPA) published a startling article titled, "Africa Is a Jihadist Playground for the Resurgent Islamic State and al-Qaeda." The report explained that although the jihadi presence in Africa is nothing new, failure to remove it and neutralize its influence has "encouraged the extremists to penetrate shaky and unstable regimes hit by internal strife, poverty, and ethnic confrontations." As JCPA explains,

Most of those jihadist groups are the offspring of either the Islamic State or of the al-Qaida organizations and have been active in the Sahel areas for many years...creating a vast web, interconnecting with other jihadist organizations, and extending their presence and destructive activities to Burkina Faso, Benin, the Central African Republic, the Ivory Coast, and Senegal. They have now reached the eastern parts of Africa (Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Mozambique), thus creating a jihadist belt that begins in the Atlantic Ocean shores and reaches the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Clearly Africa is in trouble. It is well documented that Christian communities, churches, clergy and leadership suffer exceptional levels of death and destruction when jihadist attack. No country better exemplifies this tragic reality than Nigeria.

The most populous and commercially significant country in Africa, Nigeria is the site of what has been described as a slow-motion genocide. Tens of thousands of Christians have been massacred there in recent years. In February 2021, a Family Research Council report on Nigeria documented horrifying statistics of mass murders there, primarily at the hands of three Islamist terrorist groups: Boko Haram, Islamic State of West Africa Province and Fulani jihadis. Some local observers assert that these groups cooperate with each other, and may even have discreet support from the current Nigerian government.

Hardly a day passes without accounts of mass kidnappings of Nigerian schoolchildren, Christian clergy and aid workers gunned down, villages torched and churchgoers massacred. In recent days, while hundreds of terrified girls were being kidnapped from their school and held for ransom, extremists released a video of a Christian pastor, Bulus Yikura, pleading for his life.

Calling on President Muhammadu Buhari and other politicians, Yikura exclaimed: "If you want me alive, I beg you in your capacity as president, the governor and our local government chairman to save me from this suffering." Thankfully, within a week's time Pastor Bulus's ransom was paid and he was released by his captors—the ISIS-affiliated Boko Haram terror group.

In a recent conversation, one of America's most highly respected experts on international religious freedom, former U.S. congressman Frank Wolf, expressed his deep concern about Africa. He explained that Nigeria's deteriorating security and rapidly escalating violence serves as a warning to the rest of the continent, and indeed, to the whole world. He explained,

Boko Haram is committing genocide against Christians, having killed over 30,000. Boko Haram has killed more civilians in Nigeria than ISIS slaughtered in Iraq and Syria combined. Meanwhile, Fulani militants are committing crimes against humanity and genocidal massacres against Christians.... Nigeria may very well implode. And with continuing economic, political and security deterioration, refugees will soon flee that troubled continent by the millions.

Slowly—too slowly—the United States and other global leaders are beginning to wake up to the horrifying levels of violence suffocating Nigeria and other countries in Africa. Let's hope that effective, responsive actions will finally be taken. And let's pray that those actions won't be too few, or come too late.

APPG launches commentary on the current state of FoRB

APPG (01.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3qcO6TC> - The All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief has today published its latest **Commentary on the Current State of International Freedom of Religion or Belief** (FoRB). This coincides with the current meeting of the UN Human Rights Council – the Commentary is partly intended to inform UK policy on FoRB as articulated at the HRC.

There is a particular emphasis on the impact that the global pandemic has had on FoRB. The Foreword, written by three eminent authorities on FoRB, states "*The Commentary recalls the UN Secretary General's observation that there has been a 'tsunami of hate and xenophobia'. Religion and belief communities have been blamed for the virus; made scapegoat for the outbreaks; castigated as irresponsible 'super-spreaders'; accused of being resistant to implement public health measures, of peddling 'phoney' remedies, of opposing vaccinations – etc, etc. Whilst freedom of conscience must of course be respected, many of these attacks, which have made some religion or belief groups the*

target of conspiracy theories and of hate speech have amounted to little more than self-serving attempts to deflect attention from the failure of the authorities in relation to these matters."

There is also a focus on the issue of gender and FoRB – *"This year in particular, in which the UN Special Rapporteur has placed a special focus on the impact of gender on the enjoyment of the freedom of religion or belief, it is shocking to note the extent to which issues concerning gender discriminations have once again risen to the fore. The longstanding impacts of gender-based discrimination continue to be damningly negative, exacerbating the dehumanisation, inequalities and violations which were already being suffered."*

In July 2020, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) published the 2019 Human Rights and Democracy Report. The report *"provided an assessment of the global human rights situation, and set out the UK Government's thematic, consular, and programme work to advance human rights throughout the world. It focused on 30 countries where we are particularly concerned about human rights issues, and where we consider that the UK can make a real difference."*

This APPG commentary is primarily intended to offer the staff at the newly-reorganised Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) the reliable, detailed, evidence-based monitoring and analysis of FoRB violations that is essential for formulating, implementing and evaluating realistic policies and actions to address FoRB and interlinked human rights violations. The Commentary includes 24 profiles of countries with significant FoRB violations.

The Commentary offers recommendations for action at the FCDO – including the proposals ***"That the FCDO continues to affirm FoRB as a priority concern within its human rights agenda, and ensures that it is actively recognised as a key dimension of COVID-19 pandemic responses, and maintains its focus on gender and sexual violence in conflict; that at a time of reorganisation, and serious budget cuts, the FCDO takes every care to maximise the potential opportunities of its reorganisation by mainstreaming FoRB considerations into its new processes at every level."***

Photo : unsplash.com

UN approves global conference on protecting religious sites

By EDITH M. LEDERER



UNITED NATIONS/AP) – The U.N. General Assembly adopted a resolution Thursday condemning damage and destruction of religious sites and asking the secretary-general to convene a global conference to spearhead public support for safeguarding places of religious heritage.

AP (21.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3iE0VnR> -The resolution condemns the increasing targeting of “cultural property, including religious sites and ritual objects ... by terrorist attacks and outlawed militias,” often resulting in destruction as well as theft and illicit trafficking of stolen items.

It strongly deplores “all attacks on and in religious places, sites and shrines ... including any deliberate destruction of relics and monuments” which violate international law. And it condemns all threats to attack, damage or destroy religious sites, “and denounces any moves to obliterate or forcibly convert any religious sites.”

The resolution was proposed by Saudi Arabia and co-sponsored by Arab nations including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Yemen, Bahrain, Sudan, Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Palestine, which is recognized as a non-member observer state by the United Nations. Bangladesh, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Mauritania, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines and Venezuela were also co-sponsors.

The resolution was supported by the United States and the European Union and adopted by consensus, with Assembly President Volkan Bozkir declaring: “It is so decided.”

The resolution notes that the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion are enshrined in the U.N. Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and that previous international efforts also focused on preventing the desecration of religious sites.

“Religious sites are representative of the history, social fabric and traditions of people in every country and community all over the world and should be fully respected as such,” the resolution says.

It reaffirms that “addressing the destruction of tangible and intangible cultural heritage needs to be holistic, encompassing all regions.” It must also contemplate “both prevention and accountability, focusing on acts by state and non-state actors in both conflict and non-conflict situations, and terrorist acts.”

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is asked to convene a conference involving U.N. bodies, the 193 U.N. member nations, political figures, religious leaders, faith-based organizations, media, civil society and others to help spearhead progress on implementing the United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites.

In the forward to the plan, released in September 2019, Guterres pointed to the surge in anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim hatred, attacks on Christians and violence targeting members of other faiths and traditions.

The plan includes measures focused on prevention, preparedness and response.

It calls on governments to ensure that religious sites “are defined as vulnerable targets” and that measures are taken to ensure they are safeguarded. It also calls on authorities to determine “soft” targets and vulnerable sites and conduct risk assessments on threats, and to “ensure that comprehensive measures are in place for the immediate response to an attack.”

Christians face a climate of fear in six Asian countries

North Korea, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Iran and India are worst for Christian persecution, says Open Doors

[Ben Joseph](#)

UCA (21.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3iRv4QN> - Christians in six Asian countries live under extreme persecution where feudal, oligarchic, authoritarian and theocratic governments call the shots, says the latest report by a Christian advocacy group.

The 2021 World Watch List, compiled by the US-based Christian advocacy group Open Doors, says North Korea, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Iran and India are hotbeds of Christian persecution in Asia.

These countries have been occupying positions ranging from first to 10th for global Christian persecution since 2015, according to the report released on Jan. 13.

Christians in these nations are harassed, discriminated against and put to death for their faith because the majority community and authoritarian governments view Christianity as a relic of white privilege and a symbol of Western colonialism, the group said.

Except in North Korea, where the communist party’s diktats run riot, governments in the other five countries are remote-controlled by hardliners and conservatives who fear that Christianity is always susceptible to external influences and use it as a ploy to mobilize the majority against the Christian minority, the report said.

Of late, violence in the form of abductions, forced conversions and sex attacks perpetrated against Christian women go unnoticed and unreported as the governments and law-enforcement agencies, including the legal system, openly appease the majoritarian mob.

Less surprisingly, in countries such as Afghanistan, Yemen, India and Pakistan, the fringe elements act as the mainstream and inflict horrific abuses on Christians, the report said.

Christians in the worst-hit Asian countries are holed up in harsh labor camps where forced labor, torture, persecution, starvation, rape, forced abortion and sexual violence have become the order of the day.

Moreover, extrajudicial killings are staged when it suits the fringe elements and governments to enter the good books of the majoritarian mob after molding the political narrative of the country to suit violence.

The intolerant governments in these countries use the legal route to target Christians and sweeping anti-conversion laws and notorious blasphemy laws are in force that come in handy against Christians.

Open Doors has been compiling the World Watch List since 2002 and awards countries scores based on violence levels.

Other countries in this year's list are Somalia, Libya, Eritrea and Nigeria in Africa.

North Korean Christians in labor camps

In communist North Korea, paying obeisance to anyone or anything other than paramount and recalcitrant leader Kim Jong-un and his party is forbidden. Kim enjoys near-deification status and a personality cult.

No wonder then that the East Asian nation of 26 million people dubiously occupies the first slot in the Open Doors report, as it has for the past 20 years.

Being discovered as a Christian in 37-year-old Kim's country can invite a lifelong stay in a labor camp as a political prisoner.

According to Open Doors, nearly 70,000 Christians are currently toiling in labor camps in North Korea. The Christian population living under the single-party dictatorship is pegged at 400,000.

With the help of secret police, Christians are identified and handpicked and there are instances of children being used against parents and husband against wife to zero in on a practicing Christian.

Islamic torture

Forsaking the official Islam religion comes with dire consequences in Afghanistan, which is the second-worst Asian country for Christian persecution on the list.

Hardliners identify and round up Christians. Family members also engage in so-called "honor killings" of Christians to disown believers, making it hard for Christians to get new recruits.

In Pakistan, another Islamic country, Christians are considered second-class citizens and associated with low, dirty and dishonorable jobs. They are often victims of bonded labor, a form of modern-day slavery.

Middle-class Christian youths face discrimination at workplaces where Muslim counterparts tilt the balance.

The misuse of the notorious blasphemy law threatens the lives of Christians who form just 1.59 percent in the overwhelmingly Muslim nation of 212 million.

From 2011 to 2015, which witnessed the rise of right-wing parties in Pakistan, more than 1,296 blasphemy cases were filed.

According to the US Commission for International Religious Freedom, there are 80 persons on death row or serving life imprisonment in blasphemy-related cases.

India's draconian laws

After the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014, Christians, particularly those in Hindi-speaking northern India, are accused of dubious conversions.

Hindu groups, collectively called Sangh Parivar, support the BJP's goal of a theocratic Hindu nation and fear a rise in the Christian population will adversely affect their mission.

Several states have enacted draconian anti-conversion laws, making conversion without informing the government a punishable offense.

Any sort of public display of Christian faith can invite the wrath of right-wing groups, who have managed to keep tabs on foreign funding of Christian charity organizations to undermine their financial resources and routine functioning, the report said.

The impunity with which Christians are persecuted in these six Asian countries has created a regional problem which is the worst in the world due to the apparent reluctance of governments to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators.

Though one in eight Christians face violence worldwide, their number is two out of five in Asia, where Christians live in a climate of fear due to rampant religious persecution.

20 Catholic missionaries killed in 2020

America reported the highest number of killings with the deaths of five priests and three laypeople.



Oblate Father Jozef Hollanders was killed in a robbery in a parish near Mahikeng, South Africa, on Jan. 12, 2020. He was among 20 Catholic missionaries killed worldwide in 2020. (Photo: [Fides.org](https://www.fides.org))

UCA News (02.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/35494fC> - At least 20 Catholic missionaries were killed globally in 2020, including six laypeople and eight priests, reported a Vatican news agency.

The dead included three religious women, two seminarians and a religious man, Agenzia Fides, the Pontifical Mission Societies' information service, reported on Dec. 30.

Three of the killed were in Asia — one priest, one seminarian and one layman.

The highest number of Catholic missionaries killed was reported from America, where five priests and three laypeople were murdered.

The African continent reported seven murders of missionaries. One priest, three religious women, one seminarian and two laypeople were killed in Africa.

In the last 20 years, at least 535 Catholic Church workers have been killed globally, including five bishops.

Even in 2020, many pastoral workers lost their lives during attempted hold-ups and robberies in impoverished nations where governments are weakened by "corruption and compromises and in the total lack of respect for life and for every human right," the agency said.

None of the dead carried "out striking feats or actions, but simply shared the same daily life as the majority of the population, bearing their evangelical witness as a sign of Christian hope," the agency said.

Fides, founded in 1927, releases an annual list of murdered Catholic workers. It uses the term "missionary" to refer to "all the baptized engaged in the life of the Church who died violently."

The 2020 figure is less than in previous years. In 2019, Fides reported the deaths of 29 missionaries. In 2018, it said 40 missionaries were killed, while in 2017 at least 23 were killed.