

Persecuted and Forgotten?

A report on Christians
oppressed for their Faith
2017-19



A snapshot of a
deepening crisis



Aid to the
Church in Need

ACN UNITED KINGDOM


Persecuted and Forgotten?

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Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2017-19 by John Pontifex and John Newton.

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AT-A-GLANCE FINDINGS

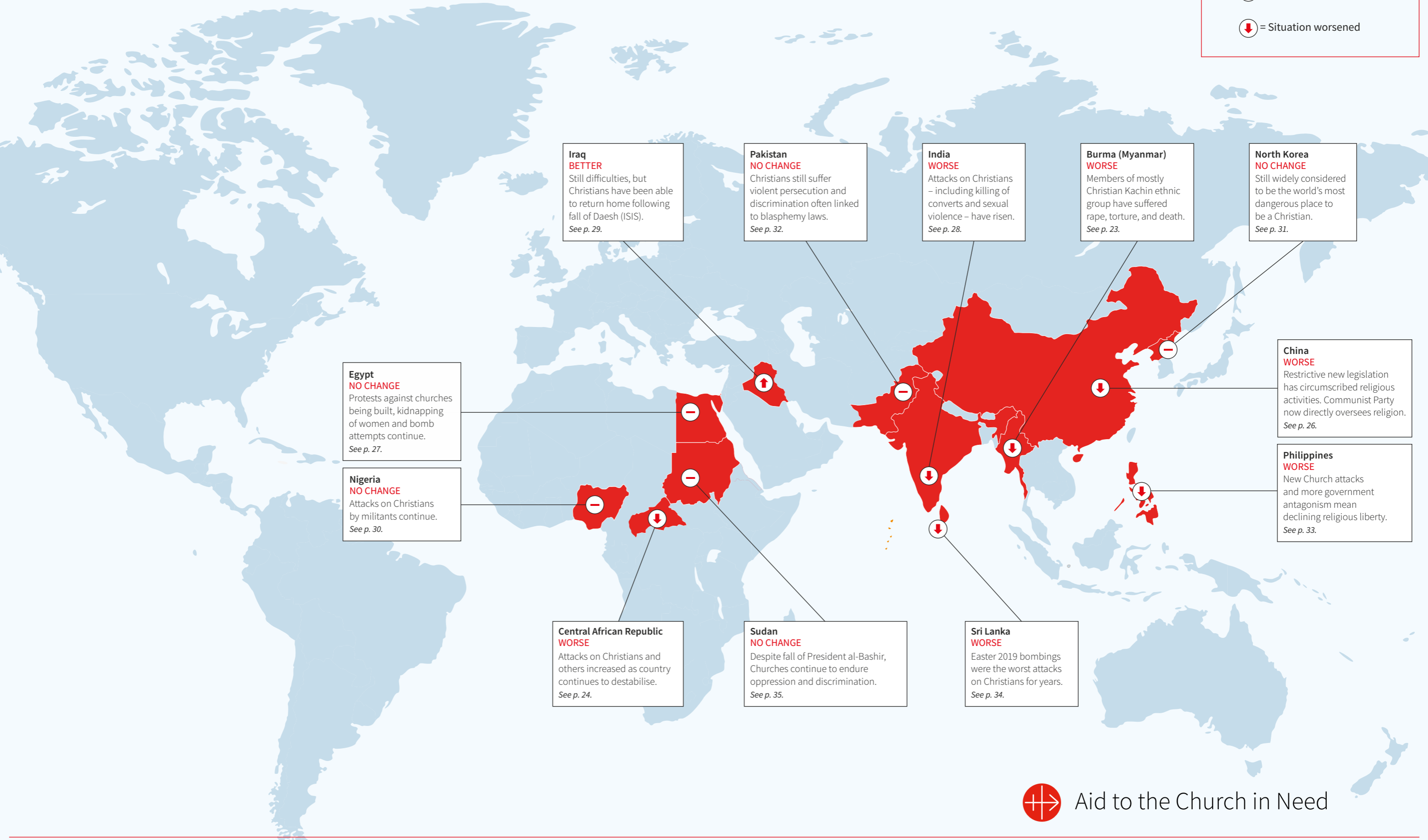
- Persecution of Christians in core Middle East countries such as Syria and Iraq has declined greatly following a period of genocide earlier in the decade.
- The impact of this genocide – continuing migration, security crises, extreme poverty and slow recovery – means that it may now be too late for some Middle East Christian communities to recover. In some towns and cities, the countdown to Christianity’s disappearance is ticking ever louder.
- The international community, while showing unprecedented concern regarding persecution, is running out of time if it wants to save Christianity in many parts of the Middle East. Measures taken to date may not be enough to secure the future of the Church’s presence there.
- From Nigeria in West Africa to Madagascar in the east, Christians in parts of Africa are threatened by Islamists seeking to eliminate the Church – either by use of force or by dishonest means, including bribing people to convert.
- Persecution against Christians has worsened the most in South and East Asia. This is now the regional hot spot for persecution.
- Church attacks in Sri Lanka and the Philippines show that there is now an unholy trinity of threats facing Christians in South and East Asia: Islamic extremism, populist nationalism and authoritarian regimes.
- An increasing unity of purpose between religio-nationalist groups and government represents a growing – and largely unrecognised – threat to Christians and other minorities in India, Sri Lanka, Burma (Mynamar) and other core countries in South and East Asia.
- Around the world, Christians are a favoured target for violent militant extremists who operate without boundaries and who perceive local Christians as a legitimate alternative to a direct strike on the West.

Period under review:
July 2017 to July 2019 (inclusive)

AT-A-GLANCE COUNTRIES OVERVIEW

PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS 2017-19 COMPARED WITH 2015-17

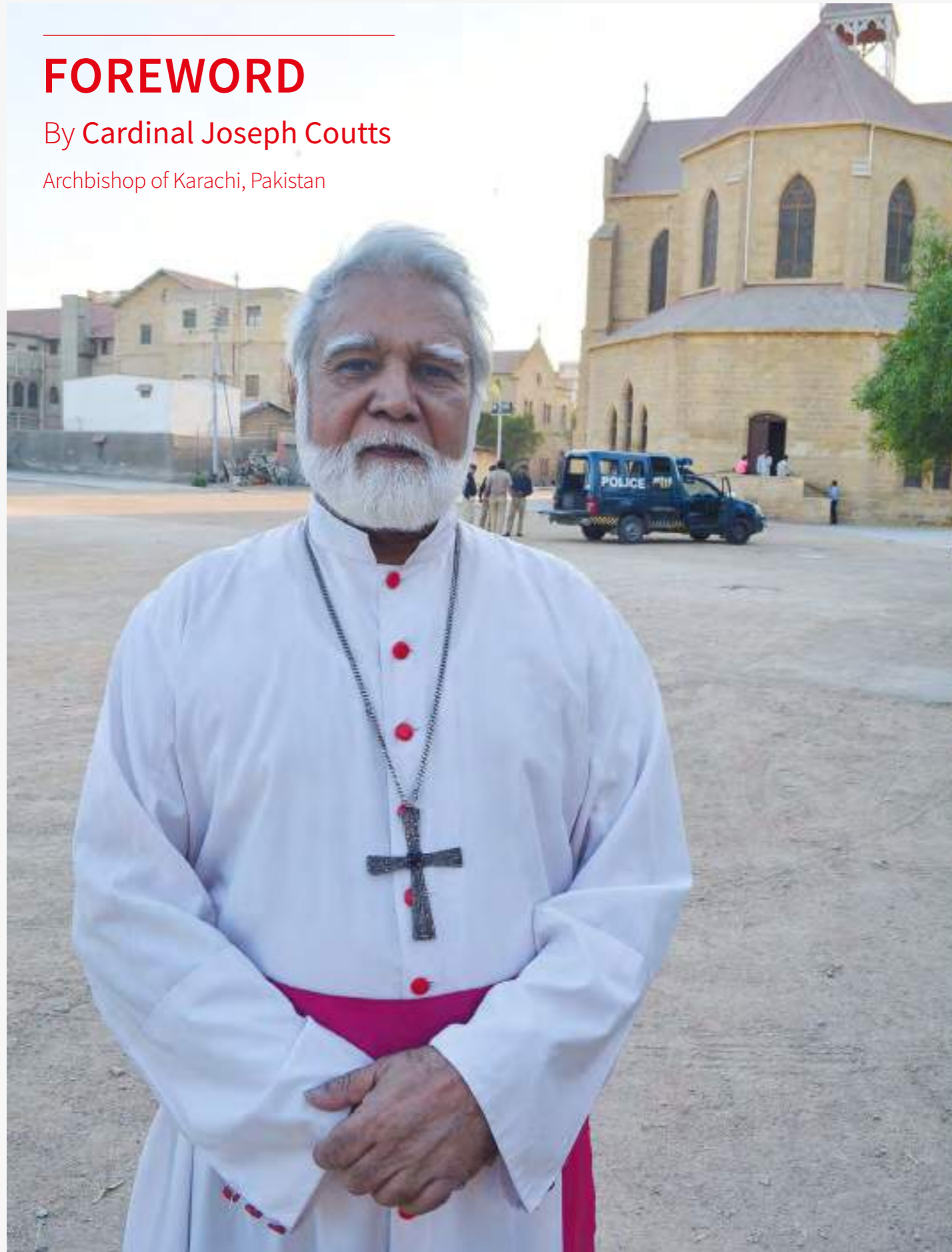
-  = Situation improved
-  = Situation unchanged
-  = Situation worsened



FOREWORD

By Cardinal Joseph Coutts

Archbishop of Karachi, Pakistan



It is an established fact that the most persecuted religion in the world today is Christianity, even though many people are not aware of this. For many years, ACN, with branches in many countries, has been working to make the voice of these voiceless Christians heard. Equally important is ACN's campaign of prayer and support for suffering Christians throughout the world.

Having been associated with ACN and seen their good work over more than two decades, I feel honoured to write this foreword to the 2017-19 edition of *Persecuted and Forgotten?*

Persecution of a religion can take on many forms. It could be like the direct brutal attacks carried out by Daesh (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria against Christians and Yazidis, or it could take on more subtle forms such as discrimination, threats, extortion, kidnapping and forced conversion, denying of rights or curtailing of freedom.

In the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, where Christians are a tiny minority in a large population of over 200 million, we have faced all of the above over the years. In difficult times we have also found strength from the encouragement and support received from ACN.

No doubt, the constitution of our country gives us freedom to practise our religion, and there are many churches as well as Christian schools, hospitals and charitable institutions in Pakistan that serve all the people without distinction. However, although the Church, through its many institutions, plays a significant role in the development of the country, there remain deep-rooted prejudices and negative perceptions of non-Muslims in our society. These can easily be brought to the fore by hate-mongering elements or when clerics misuse the loudspeakers of a mosque to incite hatred. This is what happened in 1997 when a large mob, fuelled by a rumour that the holy *Qur'an* had been desecrated by a Christian, was incited to attack a big Christian village called Shantinagar (*Peace-ville*). Fortunately, the Christians fled to save their lives, leaving the mob to destroy churches and houses.

In recent years there has been a growing intolerance in society, aggravated by the growth of militant and extremist Islamic groups such as

the *Taliban* and others affiliated to *Al Qaeda* and *Daesh*. In 2001 we had the traumatic experience of two young extremists, armed with automatic weapons, bursting into a church in Bahawalpur and killing 15 worshippers and wounding dozens of others. This was the first time we had such an attack on a church. The government and the majority population condemned such a brutal attack; profound sorrow and sympathy was shown by our Muslim brethren. But other such attacks were to follow, even on the mosques of some Muslim sects. The worst to date was the attack of a suicide bomber on the Sunday congregation as people were leaving All Saints' Church in Peshawar in 2013. Up to 150 churchgoers were killed and almost twice that number wounded.

Since then there have been nearly a dozen other attacks – with mercifully fewer casualties – thanks to armed police guards provided by our government. The government provides armed police protection, whenever we request it for church services or gatherings. But militant groups have become difficult to control, thus leaving us in a state of constant tension, knowing at the back of our minds that somewhere at some time there is going to be another attack – where or when is anybody's guess.

Yes, we do have the freedom to believe and to practise our faith, but we have to be ready to face the wrath of those elements in our country who have a different mind-set. The words of Jesus to his disciples are there to remind us what His followers should expect: "*If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you*" (John 15:20).

We unite our sufferings with those who suffer more than us and find inspiration in the words of the Apostle Paul: "*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body*" (2 Cor. 4:8-10).

+ Joseph Cardinal Coutts
Archbishop of Karachi



The bomb-blasted Maronite Cathedral in Aleppo's Old City, Syria.

PERSECUTED AND FORGOTTEN?

Main Findings

A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2017-19

“They did evil things to us. They beat us and raped us. The worst of all was girls aged nine who were raped.”¹

These are the words of Rita Habib, a Christian woman from Iraq's Nineveh Plains.

Ms Habib described how Daesh (ISIS) extremists kidnapped her from Qaraqosh, a mainly Christian town. Initially, she was held in nearby Mosul, before being transferred to Syria. There she was repeatedly bought and sold in Daesh's sex slave market.

Her account of persecution (*See case study 'Rita Habib – Daesh (ISIS) captive returns home to Qaraqosh, Iraq' on p.10*) is one of many received by Aid to the Church in Need, the Catholic charity for Christians who suffer for their faith. As an organisation providing emergency and pastoral relief in nearly 140 countries around the world, ACN is committed to chronicling and assessing human rights violations against Christians around the world today. *Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2017-19* summarises the findings of ACN's ongoing research, assessing recent patterns of hatred and discrimination.

This 2019 edition of *Persecuted and Forgotten?* examines key developments in 12 countries of core concern for Christians suffering human rights abuses. Covering a 25-month period from July 2017 to July 2019 (inclusive), the report draws on fact-finding trips carried out by Aid to the Church in Need staff to countries noted for persecution against Christians, for example northern Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria and other parts of the world which cannot be revealed because of security concerns. This report shows that, again and again, in Egypt, Pakistan and elsewhere, Christian women suffer the most, with reports of abductions, forced conversions and sex attacks.²

In spite of the growing wealth of information on the subject, the extent of the crisis facing Christians persecuted for their faith remains little known and understood. While statistical research has offered considerable insight into the topic of Christian persecution, some data has not stood up to scrutiny and is unable to demonstrate that the violence in question is religiously motivated.³ That said, studies consistently show that Christians suffer significantly high levels of persecution and intolerance. In June 2018, the Pew Research Center stated that over the course of 2016 Christians suffered harassment in 144 countries.⁴ By this calculation, Christians emerge as the world's "most widely targeted"⁵ faith group, slightly ahead of Islam.⁶ In January 2019, Open Doors estimated in its World Watch List for 2018 that 73 countries with 245 million Christians "showed extreme, very high or high levels of persecution"⁷. This was up from 58 countries with 215 million Christians in 2017.⁸ The same survey showed that every day on average 11 Christians are killed for their faith in the 50 worst-offending countries.⁹

This evaluation does not set out to be comprehensive. ACN's essentially qualitative assessment is unable to provide statistics to facilitate a full comparative analysis. In addition, state oppression is entirely different by nature from sporadic acts of violence – and conditions of persecution are not uniform across any one particular country.

MIDDLE EAST

Chief among the report's findings is that **in core countries of the Middle East, the persecution of Christians lessened during 2017-19 after a period of genocide.** During the period under review, Islamist violence steeply declined in Iraq and Syria – with some signs of improvement in Egypt too. An Aid to the Church in Need fact-finding trip to Syria in February 2019 revealed that in many parts of the country extreme poverty had supplanted persecution as the main problem facing Christians.¹⁰

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7 World Watch List Trends, *Open Doors*, <https://www.opendoors.org.za/christian-persecution/world-watch-list-2017-trends/>
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CASE STUDY

RITA HABIB

Daesh (ISIS) captive returns home to Qaraqosh, Iraq

APRIL 2018

Rita Habib – one of the Christian women abducted from Qaraqosh by Daesh (ISIS) and forced into sex slavery – was finally reunited with her father. Ms Habib was transferred from Qaraqosh – the last Christian-majority town in Iraq before falling to the Islamists – to Mosul, before being moved to Syria some months later. She described the misery she faced: “I was bought and sold four times. They did evil things to us. They beat us and raped us... The worst of all was girls aged nine who were raped.” She was rescued by members of the Shlama Foundation who posed as jihadis at a Daesh slave auction and bought her for \$20,000. She said: “I am very happy that after three years I reunited with my father. It is a joyous moment because he is the only family I have left”. Only seven of the women abducted from Qaraqosh have returned – the estimated numbers of those seized when the town fell range from 45 to 100s.

Sources: Karzan Sulaivany, “Christian woman kidnapped by IS reunited with father after four years”, *Kurdistan 24*, 5th April 2018, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/987a77c3-56c3-44b7-a8f9-e6a8d63d0e00?>; Louise Callaghan, “Iraq’s Christians welcome home the women stolen by Isis”, *The Sunday Times*, 15th July 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/iraq-s-christians-welcome-home-the-women-stolen-by-isis-pbpbcn2n0?> (all sites accessed 25th July 2019).



Rita Habib



Saints Sarkis and Bakhos Syriac Orthodox Church in Qaraqosh after it was attacked by Daesh (ISIS)

Hence, this is the first edition of *Persecuted and Forgotten?* since 2011 in which Syria does not appear among countries selected for special consideration in this report.

In Syria and Iraq, the main reason why persecution against Christians has declined is the military defeat of Daesh (ISIS), declared in 2017.¹¹ Daesh continued to claim responsibility for attacks, including a bomb blast outside a church in Qamishli in July 2019,¹² but such violence was much reduced compared to the previous reporting period when Daesh still controlled major parts of both countries,¹³ such as Mosul, Iraq’s second city.¹⁴ More compelling evidence of genocide against Christians and minorities came to light as the extremists were pushed back.¹⁵

The period under review showed the effects of the genocide continued to play out long after the perpetrators had left. In terms of the numbers of Christians migrating, the devastating impact on the economy, the psychological trauma and the break-up of ancient communities, the full impact of the genocide reached its zenith in the period between 2017 and 2019. Reports showed that Iraq’s Christian population continued to decline. Christians had numbered 1.5 million before 2003¹⁶ and yet by summer 2019, Christians in Iraq were “well below” 150,000¹⁷ and perhaps even “below 120,000”.¹⁸ This means that, within a generation, Iraq’s Christian population has shrunk by more than 90 percent. In large parts of the country, many months on from the fall of Daesh, there is little sign of refugee Christians returning to Iraq; indeed, families continued to leave. In July 2019, Father Amanuel Kloof, who said he was the only priest staying in Mosul, claimed that two years after Daesh were ousted from the city, there were at most 40 Christians living there.¹⁹ And yet, in early 2014, just before Daesh seized Mosul, there were at least 6,000²⁰ Christians living there, down from 35,000 in 2003.²¹ This means that within 16

years Christians have declined by nearly 99 percent in Mosul, a city where Christianity dates back almost 2,000 years.²² More and more, the survival of Christianity in Iraq depended on Erbil and the Nineveh Plains, where Aid to the Church in Need and others have helped internally displaced Christians return to their ancient homelands following the defeat of Daesh. By June 2019, 9,130 Christian families were back in Nineveh, 46 percent of the total in 2014, before Daesh invaded.²³ However, there persisted “the threat”²⁴ of Shabak Shi’a militia groups hostile to Christians. In the former Christian-majority town of Bartela, where the security is overseen by a Shi’a-backed militia, parish priest Father Benham Benoka reported a “covert boycott” of Christian-run shops. He described how Shi’a shrines had been erected in front of ancient Christian sites and said that loudspeakers broadcasting Muslim prayers had been strategically placed in Christian areas. Father Benoka described ongoing pressure “to force [the Christians] from our lands.”²⁵ Senior clergy in Iraq are increasingly raising concerns about the existential threat to the survival of the Church, especially in the event of “another edition of ISIS”,²⁶ “another wave of persecution”,²⁷ with reports of Daesh fighters going “underground”²⁸ and coming back across the border into Iraq.²⁹ In an interview with ACN, Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil said: “With each successive cycle, the number of Christians falls away, till today we are at the point of extinction.”³⁰ **Were there to be another Daesh-style assault on the faithful, it could result in the Church’s disappearance. However, if security can be guaranteed there is every indication that Christianity could survive in Nineveh and Erbil.**

In Syria in mid-2017, Christians were estimated at below 500,000³¹ – down from 1.5 million before the conflict began in 2011.³² In Aleppo at the start of the civil war, Christians numbered 180,000.³³ As such, they were one of the largest

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12 “Car bomb near church in Syria wounds several”, *Catholic Herald*, 15th July 2019, <https://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2019/07/15/car-bomb-near-church-in-syria-wounds-several/>
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27 Simon Caldwell, “Iraqi archbishop fears more persecution, says IS went underground”, *Cruz*, 9th October 2018, <https://cruznw.com/church-in-asia-oceania/2018/10/09/iraqi-archbishop-fears-more-persecution-says-is-went-underground/>
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CASE STUDY

Attack on St Ignatius's Church, Nigeria



Father Joseph Gor



Father Felix Tyolaha

APRIL 2018

Father Joseph Gor and Father Felix Tyolaha were among 19 Catholics who died after gunmen opened fire at a 5.30am mass in St Ignatius's Church. Around 30 terrorists entered the church in Mbalom in Nigeria's Middle Belt on 24th April 2018. Nine-year-old altar server Oryiman Akule said: "As soon as the priest started the Mass, he sighted some people with guns running towards the church and alerted people but, almost at the same time, they began to shoot... We ran and hid in one building." Following the church attack, assailants shot at local residents. More than 50 homes were torched as people retreated, and food barns were set ablaze. Authorities believed Islamist Fulani herdsmen were responsible. Father Gor, one of the priests killed, had been warning about the ongoing threat posed by Fulani extremists.

Sources: Murcadha O Flaherty and John Pontifex, "Bishops – President should resign for inaction over 'killing fields and mass graveyard'", *Aid to the Church in Need (UK) News*, 30th April 2018, <https://acnuk.org/news/bishops-president-should-resign-for-inaction-over-nigerias-killing-fields-and-mass-graveyard/>; "Eighteen killed in Benue church by suspected herdsmen", *The Guardian (Nigeria)*, 24th April 2018, <https://guardian.ng/news/eighteen-killed-in-benue-church-by-suspected-herdsmen/>; Hembadoon Orsar, "Nigeria: Benue Church Attack – the Untold Story of Ukpo, Ayar Mbalom", *All Africa*, 22nd June 2018, <https://allafrica.com/stories/201806220622.html> (all sites accessed 25th July 2019).



Christian communities not just in Syria but across the region. Maronite Archbishop Joseph Tobji of Aleppo told ACN that, after at least seven years of war, Christians in the city and district had fallen to 32,000.³⁴ Sources in the city close to Aid to the Church in Need said that **by July 2019 Christians in Aleppo had dwindled to 29,000, declining by 3,000 within the last year alone. This means that Christians in Aleppo, once one of the most significant centres for the Church in the whole of the Middle East, have declined more than 80 percent within just eight years. No recovery is in sight, only further reductions in the number of faithful.** Archbishop Tobji said 40 percent of the Christians left in his diocese were “older people”,³⁵ likely to need care homes. ACN visits to Syria revealed that young men want to flee the country to escape military service.³⁶ Archbishop Tobji described ongoing emigration of Christians as “our bleeding wound”,³⁷ saying people want to escape Syria’s deepening economic crisis. ACN visits to the region did show that some Syrian Christians are determined to stay in the country, returning to cities such as Homs,³⁸ but, in general terms, **military victory over Daesh has failed to stem the flow of Christians fleeing Syria.** ACN interviews with Christian refugees in neighbouring Lebanon and Jordan show the faithful have little appetite to return.³⁹ Although moderate Muslims did indicate a wish for Christians to stay, ACN reports highlight a growing marginalisation of Christians in society, with increasing discrimination in the workplace and in public. Syria has at least twice as many Christians as Iraq. As such, Syria’s Christians have more influence at a time when the country’s all-important new post-war constitution is due to be drawn up.⁴⁰

Numbering 10 million, Christians in Egypt, by contrast, have proved better able to weather the storms of jihadi violence. Unlike in Iraq and Syria, there were numerous egregious jihadi violent attacks on the Copts during the reporting period. In November 2018, seven people were killed and 19 injured when Islamists ambushed three buses carrying Christian pilgrims.⁴¹ That said, the severity of attacks on Christians declined sharply in 2018-19 compared to previous years, a period which included the April 2017 Palm Sunday attacks at St Mark’s Cathedral, Alexandria and Mar Girgis Church, Tanta.⁴² In a statement for this report, Coptic Orthodox Archbishop Angaelos of London stated: “[In Egypt], we have thankfully not seen the mass bombings or shootings that were prevalent before, but we

are continuing to experience attacks in the villages and isolated areas at a smaller scale, but with equally brutal outcomes.⁴³ With militant Islamists describing Copts as their “favourite prey”,⁴⁴ President al-Sisi vowed to act, later stating that “2018 saw the lowest number of terrorist attacks compared to the past five years.”⁴⁵ In November 2018, there were reports that the state had given authorisation for about 340 churches, a “slow but significant move”,⁴⁶ with a further 3,740 churches still awaiting registration. Archbishop Angaelos contrasted the state’s “positive work” to combat violence and discrimination against Christians in urban areas with rural parts of Egypt, where he said mob attacks on Christians were still “a regular occurrence”. He added: “Local police in certain villages have been found to not address situations sufficiently and are at times complicit in terms of just standing by and letting the violence happen.”⁴⁷

Looking at the region as a whole, although the scale of violence against Christians is much reduced, evidence suggests that **the retreating Daesh Islamists have left behind a legacy of increased hostility towards Christians among sections of the local community. Church leaders described how the militants have kindled a caliphate mentality, which brands Christians as unwelcome outsiders in spite of the fact that their presence in**

the region pre-dates the coming of Islam. Describing ongoing Islamist violence in Egypt, Coptic Archbishop Angaelos of London said: “These continuing attacks have become inspired by the caliphate model that has been witnessed across the region.”⁴⁸ Chaldean Catholic Patriarch Louis Raphael I Sako of Baghdad, leader of Iraq’s largest Christian community, said: “The ideology of ISIS is so strong, even among simple people, because of the speech in the mosques. . . Fundamentalism is the biggest challenge today.”⁴⁹ Especially with reference to Iraq, it is no exaggeration to say that **Daesh may have lost the battle for military supremacy in the Middle East but in parts of the region they are on course for victory in achieving wipe-out of the much-hated “worshippers of the cross”⁵⁰ – the Christians.**

AFRICA

Across Africa, jihadi violence against Christians remained at critical levels. In July 2019 in Burkina Faso, Bishop Laurent Birfuoré Dabiré of Dori said Islamists had killed four Christians and had threatened to murder others too if they refused to convert.⁵¹ In Niger, Bishop Ambroise Ouédraogo of Maradi told ACN in June 2019 that Islamist fundamentalist attacks on Christians happen “time and again”⁵² and Sister Catherine Kingbo from the same diocese said this threat had changed



Chaldean Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil, Iraq met UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt in May 2019 and called for urgent aid for the Nineveh Plain’s religious minorities.

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43 Coptic Orthodox Archbishop Angaelos of London, statement, 17th July 2019.

44 Aletha Adu, “Our favourite prey’ Christian father & son ‘brutally burnt alive & shot’ by ISIS jihadis”, *Express*, 23rd February 2017, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/770972/Coptic-Christian-father-son-burnt-alive-shot-ISIS-jihadi-Egypt-al-Masri-terror-massacre>

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49 Dale Gavlak, “Iraq’s Top Catholic Cleric Concerned About Future of Country’s Christians”, *Voice of America*, 16th July 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/iraqs-top-catholic-cleric-concerned-about-future-countrys-christians>

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51 Marta Petrosillo and John Newton, “Burkina Faso: Stop support for jihadists – says bishop”, *Aid to the Church in Need (UK) News*, 5th July 2019, <https://acnuk.org/news/burkina-faso-stop-support-for-jihadists-says-bishop/>

52 “They may have guns, but we have Jesus!”, *Aid to the Church in Need (International) News*, 3rd July 2019, <https://acninternational.org/news/niger-they-may-have-guns-but-we-have-jesus/>



Jonathan Luciano, National Director of Aid to the Church in Need Philippines visiting Our Lady of Mount Carmel Cathedral following the bomb blast.

CASE STUDY

JANUARY 2019

Two bombs exploded during Sunday Mass on 27th January. Twenty people were killed and dozens wounded during the blasts at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Jolo, southern Philippines. Father Romeo Saniel, Apostolic Administrator of Jolo, told Aid to the Church in Need: “No words can describe the sorrow and pain that we feel these days... Most of those who died were our regular Sunday 8am Mass-goers.” According to local Church sources, the first blast went off at 8.45am local time. As soldiers arrived, there was a second explosion in the car park, where Mass-goers had fled to following the first explosion. Daesh (ISIS) claimed responsibility for the attack, which came within a week of a referendum on greater autonomy for the Muslim-majority region of Mindanao.

Source: John Newton, “Filipino Church calls for prayer and solidarity following bomb attack”, *Aid to the Church in Need (UK) News*, 28th January 2019, <https://acnuk.org/news/filipino-church-calls-for-prayer-and-solidarity-following-bomb-attack/> (accessed 26th June 2019).

Bombing of Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Philippines

the country beyond all recognition in the last 15 years. She added: “The evil [of Islamist attacks] is spreading.”⁵³ Violence and intimidation of this kind showed a concerted effort by extremists – drawing on considerable resources from outside the continent – to coerce Christians en masse into becoming Muslims. In Madagascar, a mainly Christian country, Cardinal Désiré Tzarahazana of Toamasina warned in June 2018 of radical evangelical Islamists “buying people” and he cited plans to build 2,600 mosques in the country.⁵⁴

In Nigeria, in the north and the ‘Middle Belt’ regions, militants continued a reign of terror against Christians and Muslims alike. Nigeria is the country where the most Christians are killed, with a reported 3,731 slain in 2018.⁵⁵ ‘Middle Belt’ Bishop Wilfred Anagbe of Makurdi told ACN that “there is a clear agenda to Islamise all the areas that are predominantly Christian.”⁵⁶ At dawn one morning in April 2018, around 30 gunmen burst into a church as Mass was starting and massacred 19 people, including two priests (see case study ‘Attack on St Ignatius’s Church, Nigeria’ on p. 12). All available evidence indicated that militant Islamist Fulani herdsmen were behind the attack, apparently disproving claims that religion played little or no part in their violence. Meanwhile, elsewhere in northern Nigeria, Boko Haram continued to attack Christians, Muslims and others. The Islamist militia seemed immune to government security intervention.

In the Central African Republic, where various religious groups came under attack,⁵⁷ Christians were targeted in a context of significant internal conflict, with accusations of violence and provocations made against both Christians and Muslims. At least 112 civilians, including two priests and a pastor, were massacred in November 2018 at a Catholic-run displacement camp in Alindao.⁵⁸

In other parts of Africa, the main threat to Christians came from the state. In Sudan, the regime carried out extreme persecution in 2017-19, bulldozing a church in Khartoum,⁵⁹ “beating”⁶⁰ converts from Islam in South Darfur and attacking

70 churches in the Nuba Mountains.⁶¹ Hopes that the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019 would signal an end of a regime responsible for scarcely paralleled anti-Christian persecution appeared to be dashed the next month when the Transitional Military Council re-affirmed its commitment to enforcing *Shari’a* law. Increased state clampdowns on Christians were also noted in Morocco.⁶² Speaking on national television on 19th June 2018, Minister of Justice Mohamed Aujjar “denied the existence”⁶³ of Christian citizens in the country, even though they number up to 25,000.⁶⁴ In Eritrea, the state suddenly and dramatically turned the full force of its ire against the Church. In June 2019, sources close to ACN reported that within a week the government had confiscated and closed down the last remaining 21 Catholic-run hospitals, health centres and clinics, serving at least 170,000 people every year.⁶⁵

SOUTH & EAST ASIA

The situation for Christians has deteriorated most in South and East Asia: this is now the regional hot spot for persecution, taking over that dubious honour from the Middle East.

Well ahead of the period under review, North Korea had emerged as the worst place in the world to be a Christian. Here, where “Christians are routinely imprisoned in labour camps”⁶⁶ and with frequent reports of physical and psychological torture, the situation continued to be so bad it could scarcely get any worse, with reports of up to 70,000 Christians in camps.⁶⁷

Two of the most serious attacks against Christians carried out by Islamist militia in the reporting period took place in South and East Asia. During Sunday Mass on 27th January 2019 two bombs exploded at the Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Jolo, Philippines, with 20 people killed and more than 100 injured.⁶⁸ (See case study ‘Bombing of Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Philippines’ on p. 16). Islamist group Abu Sayyaf was implicated⁶⁹ in the attacks and Daesh (ISIS) claimed responsibility.⁷⁰ Daesh also said it was behind violence

53 Ibid.

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57 “Central African Republic”, *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Report 2018*, p. 30, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>

58 Ibid.; “Central African Republic: ‘Everything was in flames’. The attack on a displaced persons camp in Alindao”, *Amnesty International*, 14th December 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr19/9573/2018/en/>

59 “Sudanese authorities demolish Evangelical church in Khartoum suburb”, *Sudan Tribune*, 14th February 2018, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article64728>

60 “Sudan arrests, tortures Christians in Darfur over apostasy charges”, *Sudan Tribune*, 31st October 2018, <http://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article66526>

61 “Report Claims Over 70 Churches in Nuba Region Destroyed or Burned Over Past Year”, *International Christian Concern*, 15th March 2019, <https://www.persecution.org/2019/03/15/report-claims-70-churches-nuba-region-destroyed-burned-past-year/> (accessed 18th June 2019).

62 Open Doors World Watch List 2019, p. 4.

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64 Ibid, quoting the 2017-18 Moroccan Association of Human Rights Report.

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67 Yaron Steinbuch, “Kim Jong Un bans Christmas, makes North Korea worship grandma”, *New York Post*, 25th December 2016, <https://nypost.com/2016/12/25/kim-jong-un-bans-christmas-makes-north-korea-worship-grandma/>

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69 “Five Abu Sayyaf members surrender over Philippine church bombing”, *Reuters*, 4th February 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-security-idUSKCN1PT06Z>

70 “ISIS claims responsibility for deadly bombings at church in the Philippines”, *CBS News*, 28th January 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jolo-cathedral-bombings-philippines-2019-01-27/>

Asia Bibi's daughter Eisham Ashiq,
during her 2018 visit to the UK.

CASE STUDY

Asia Bibi

**First woman
sentenced
to death for
blasphemy in
Pakistan is freed**



Asia Bibi

MAY 2019

After a long battle for justice Asia Bibi left her native Pakistan to travel to Canada to be reunited with her family. Arrested on charges of blasphemy in 2009, she was found guilty in November 2010, becoming the first woman to be sentenced to death by hanging for the crime. She continually protested her innocence. Yet justice was continually delayed. Her appeal hearing was postponed five times, until Lahore High Court upheld her death sentence in October 2014. But four years later, an appeal to the Supreme Court of Pakistan overturned the guilty verdict. Her daughter, Eisham Ashiq told Aid to the Church in Need: "This is the most wonderful moment. I am grateful to God for listening to our prayers." But even then her nightmare was not over, as mass protests led the government to allow the verdict to be appealed. However, the Supreme Court finally upheld her acquittal in January 2019. Speaking about her final release, Father Emmanuel Yousaf, National Director of Pakistan's Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, told Aid to the Church in Need: "For almost 10 years now, this is the day all of us have been waiting for when the family can at last be reunited."

Sources: John Pontifex, "Asia Bibi flies to freedom", *Aid to the Church in Need (UK) News*, 8th May 2019, <https://acnuk.org/news/pakistan-asia-bibi-flies-to-freedom/> ; John Pontifex and John Newton, "Asia Bibi's family thanks God for her acquittal", *Aid to the Church in Need (UK) News*, 31st October 2019, <https://acnuk.org/news/asia-bibis-family-thanks-god-for-her-acquittal/> (accessed 26th June 2019).

The Carmelite Mission in Bozoum, Central African Republic welcomed 4,500 internally displaced persons after militants destroyed their homes.



in Sri Lanka⁷¹ on 21st April 2019 when 258 people were killed⁷² and more than 500 were injured in attacks on three churches packed with Christians celebrating Easter Sunday. The coordinated attacks, in Negombo, Batticaloa and the capital, Colombo, were by far the worst atrocity against Christians during the period in question in terms of the number of people wounded and killed. Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, Archbishop of Colombo, Sri Lanka, criticised the government for alleged failure to tackle Islamist militancy and take action to protect Christians. He told ACN that “five training camps for jihadists have been found”.⁷³ **The attack signalled that, while the Islamists had switched strategy away from territorial gain to guerrilla warfare, attacking Christians was still a primary objective.**

Besides Islamist violence, **growing nationalist populism and state authoritarianism emerged as main drivers of persecution of Christians in South and East Asia.** In Pakistan, the threat to Christians and other minorities came from both the state and non-state actors, many of them influenced by the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan. The Human Rights Monitor 2018 report, a publication of the Pakistan Catholic bishops, described an “alarming increase in incidents of violence based on faith and the discriminatory attitudes of police and administration.”⁷⁴ A massive breakthrough came with the Supreme Court’s October 2018 acquittal of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman on death row for alleged blasphemy, (see case study *Asia Bibi – First women sentenced to death for blasphemy in Pakistan is freed’ on p. 18*) but the government’s apparent failure to tackle a growing climate of intolerance towards minorities saw the US State Department designate Pakistan as “a country of particular concern” in November 2018.⁷⁵ This came after reports of continuing violence, notably the December 2017 attack on a church in Quetta, with nine dead and more than 50 wounded.⁷⁶

In India, the principal threat to Christianity came from Hindutva nationalism. More than 1,000 attacks on Christians were reported between the beginning of 2017 and the end

of March 2019.⁷⁷ More than 100 churches closed in 2018, reportedly in response to extremist attacks or intervention by authorities.⁷⁸ Militants, inflamed by reports that the country’s Hindu population had slipped below 80 percent,⁷⁹ have stepped up hostile action – including violence – against Christians. The militant Hindutva accused Christians of acts of proselytism in contravention of anti-conversion laws, which are in place in nine states.⁸⁰ The states rigorously enforced such legislation. On 12th September 2018, for example, police in Uttar Pradesh’s Jaunpur district charged 271 Christians with “spreading lies about Hinduism” and using drugs to induce people to convert.⁸¹ Bishop Thomas Paulsamy of Dindigul told ACN in May 2018 that in the last four months alone there had been more than 15 violent anti-Christian attacks in Tamil Nadu. Stating that Hindu extremists had grown in power since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister in 2014, the bishop said the Indian leader’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) “supports the fundamentalists”⁸² and opposes religious freedom in contravention of the constitution. Hindu extremist attacks increased in neighbouring Sri Lanka, where both Christians and Muslims were targeted. In Sri Lanka’s Eastern province, 90 attacks on Christians were recorded in 2017,⁸³ with 67 between January and September 2018.⁸⁴

In China, for Christians and other minorities, especially the Uighur Muslims, 2017-19 saw a marked deterioration in human rights. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom concluded: “As a Christian, your Bible may have been rewritten by the Chinese government, your church shuttered or demolished, and your pastor imprisoned.”⁸⁵ The new Regulations on Religious Affairs, brought into force on 1st February 2018, in effect outlawed “unauthorised” religious teachings and insisted religious groups report all activity online. Efforts to “sinicise”⁸⁶ religious belief continued apace, with expressions of faith not mandated by the state strongly repressed. Even though the Vatican signed a provisional agreement with China, allowing the regime a say in episcopal appointments, “repression of the Catholic Church increased”⁸⁷ in the second half of 2018.

RESPONSE FROM INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Initiatives by the international community in response to the persecution of Christians emerged as a major theme during the reporting period. This came at a time of increased public awareness of the topic. There was massive international media coverage about Asia Bibi, the Christian woman in Pakistan whose conviction for blasphemy was overturned, culminating in her departure to Canada in May 2019.⁸⁸ The EU appointed a Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union in May 2016. Two years later, in the UK, Foreign Office Minister Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon was appointed the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief. He was tasked with “demonstrating the [UK’s] commitment to religious freedom by promoting inter-faith respect and dialogue internationally.”⁸⁹

However, there was mounting concern that the West has largely been “blind to this issue”⁹⁰ of Christian persecution and that **initiatives by the international community have yet to bring demonstrable change for many of the Christians suffering persecution.** The period under review saw increasing calls for the international community to aid persecuted Christians – an appeal of this kind was made by Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil, in Kurdistan, Iraq, when he met UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt in London in May 2019. However, Hungary was chief among the few countries in the West that provided direct aid for suffering Christians in Iraq. In July 2018, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo hosted the first annual Ministerial to “advance religious freedom around the world.”⁹¹ The meeting in Washington DC had launched a “Genocide Recovery and Persecution Response initiative.”⁹² However, in spite of a US pledge of \$300 million to help rebuild Christian and other minority faith communities in Iraq’s Nineveh Plains, criticism persisted that the US Agency for International Development (USAID) “has been very slow in getting aid out of the door.”⁹³ Although the Church did not receive funding directly from USAID, there was

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73 Marta Petrosillo, “Rapporto Annuale 2018 di Aiuto all Chiesa che Soffre oltre 111 milioni di Euro a sostegno della chiesa di tutto il mondo”, *Aid to the Church in Need (Italy)*, 14th June 2019, <https://acs-italia.org/acs-notizie-dal-mondo/rapporto-annuale-2018-di-aiuto-alla-chiesa-che-soffre-oltre-111-milioni-di-euro-a-sostegno-della-chiesa-di-tutto-il-mondo/>

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75 US Department of State, *2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Pakistan*, 21st June 2019, Pakistan (Executive Summary), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/pakistan/>

76 “Suicide bombers kill nine at Christian church in Pakistan”, *The Guardian*, 17th December 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/17/pakistani-christians-suicide-bomb-attack-quetta-church>

77 Persecution Relief, Report 2017, p. 5; Persecution Relief, Report 2018, p. 22; Persecution Relief, 1st Quarter Report 2019, p. 4.

78 Abbie Llewelyn, “Christianity Crackdown: Hindu extremists Attack Indian believers – 100 churches Shut Down”, *Daily Express*, 27th March 2019, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1105848/india-news-Christian-persecution-hindu-shut-church-violence-christianity-crackdown>

79 Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, *Census of India, 2011. Population by religious community*, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/C-01.html>; Karan Pradhan, “Religion in numbers: what 2011 Census reveals about India’s communities”, *FirstPost India*, 27th August 2015, <http://www.firstpost.com/politics/religion-in-numbers-what-the-2011-census-revealed-about-trends-across-indias-communities-2408740.html>

80 US Department of State, *2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: India*, 21st June 2019, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/india/>

81 Ibid.

82 “Modi wants a Hindu state”, *Aid to the Church in Need (International)*, 5th May 2018, <https://acninternational.org/interviews/modi-wants-a-hindu-state/>

83 Figures only to 25th December 2017. Final year-end figures might be higher. “Sri Lanka sees more than 90 attacks against Christians in 2017”, *Tamil Guardian*, 25th December 2017, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lanka-sees-more-90-attacks-against-christians-2017>

84 Human Rights Without Frontiers, op. cit.

85 *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Report 2018*, Introduction, p. 1, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>

86 Lily Kuo, “In China, they’re closing churches, jailing pastors – and even rewriting scripture”, *The Observer*, 13th January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/13/china-christians-religious-persecution-translation-bible>

87 “China”, *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Report 2018*, <https://www.uscirf.gov/countries/china>

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significant US funding for Christian areas of Iraq, primarily for civil infrastructure. By summer 2019, hopes were high that the US would back a US\$1 million training and livelihoods programme in Iraq, with the funds being routed through the local Church. If successful, the scheme has the potential to become the first of several significant US projects regularly supporting Church groups from 2020 onwards.⁹⁴

In the UK reports emerged in November 2018 that the British government was not willing to offer asylum to Asia Bibi in the weeks following her acquittal by Pakistan's Supreme Court.⁹⁵ The court's decision coincided with a visit by Asia Bibi's family, organised by Aid to the Church in Need, who had said the UK was a preferred asylum destination. At a time of growing disquiet about the UK's perceived failure to act in such a high profile case, on 26th December 2018 Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt announced a review into the persecution of Christians. Unprecedented in its scope, the independent report led by the Bishop of Truro was tasked with assessing the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office's response to Christian persecution to date and making recommendations. Among the 21 recommendations listed when the report was completed in July 2019 were that the UK government should consider imposing sanctions against countries guilty of persecution (Recommendation 8), and use its position on the UN Security Council to protect Christians in the Middle East and other persecution hot spots (Recommendation 20). The review also recommended UK Government support for #RedWednesday, the ACN initiative to engage civil society in standing in solidarity with persecuted Christians (Recommendation 19).⁹⁶ Boris Johnson⁹⁷ and Jeremy Hunt,⁹⁸ the then candidates to succeed Theresa May as Prime Minister, both signalled their commitment to act on the report's recommendations.⁹⁹

In summary, over the past two years the international community has shown unprecedented engagement with the topic of persecution of Christians. However, whatever good may come out of initiatives such as those mentioned above will take time to materialise. Facing continued violent attacks, forced exodus and possible extinction, Christians more than ever do not have time to wait. Be it in Iraq or Syria or elsewhere, future historians may say that it was yet another case of too little, too late.

CONCLUSION

In December 2018, HRH The Prince of Wales told a packed congregation in London's Westminster Abbey: "[I have met] many Christians who, with such inspiring faith and courage, are battling oppression and persecution."¹⁰⁰ In his address, given during a service dedicated to Christians in the Middle East, he highlighted the need to foster inter-faith cooperation. He said: "Extremism and division are by no means inevitable."

Although there has been a decline in violence against Christians in some parts of the world, the past two years have failed to deliver the long-awaited break-through moment when religious hatred gives way to tolerance. Nor is it likely any time soon. The rise of authoritarian regimes and popular nationalism bodes ill for Christians in countries as diverse as India, Burma (Myanmar) and China, where Christianity is seen as not only alien but as an agent of unwanted Western influence. In parts of Africa, Islamist violence is putting huge pressure on Christians. In Iraq and Syria, Christians are voting with their feet by continuing to emigrate; each person who leaves makes it harder for those left behind. If Pope Francis goes to Iraq in 2020, as announced in June 2019,¹⁰¹ what remnant of the Christian community will he find there? Whatever challenges the future holds, Aid to the Church in Need remains committed to helping Christians not only to survive persecution but also to give witness to their faith. Their testimony of hope against all the odds is the greatest source of inspiration for all those dedicated to helping them.

BURMA (MYANMAR)

"An invisible war" – this is how San Htoi of Kachin Women's Association (Thailand) described the targeting of Christians in Burma (Myanmar).¹ Despite a genocidal campaign² being waged by the Burmese army against Kachin State's 1.6 million inhabitants – of whom 90-95 percent are Christian (Roman Catholic or Baptist) – international reports have been slow to acknowledge the Kachin people's predominantly Christian identity.³ Kachin Christians have been killed, raped, tortured and used to "clear" landmine-peppered areas.⁴ Women and girls have been trafficked as brides to China.⁵ 3,000 villages have been burnt to the ground in the past decade⁶ and over 200 churches destroyed since 2011.⁷ The 2017 US Department of State religious freedom report called the plight of the 100,000 displaced Christians living in camps and thousands stranded in jungle terrain, "desperate and unsustainable",⁸ while the UN branded the violence "crimes against humanity".⁹

According to the US Department of State, minority religions in the country, including Christians, saw religious property and texts destroyed. They were also denied permits for religious buildings and renovations. Chin State "blocked Christian groups and churches from buying land in the name of their religious organisations for the purpose of worship". Christians also experienced discrimination in employment. In Karen State, Christians were issued with identification cards from central government stating they were Buddhist despite specifying that they were "Christians" on their applications. Officials refused to amend the cards.¹⁰



JUNE 2018

Two nuns were attacked by locals in Pataekyaw Village, Ann Township. Later, a priest who reported the incident was beaten by a Buddhist mob.¹¹

SEPTEMBER 2018

A UN report noted the torture and ill-treatment of Kachin Christians by soldiers. "[O]ne Christian victim was made to imitate Jesus on a cross like the crucifixion" by military intelligence agents.¹²

SEPTEMBER 2018

200 Christian leaders were detained, churches were destroyed and severe limits were imposed on worship, teaching, and evangelisation by United Wa State Army (UWSA) authorities, which control the Wa Self-Administered Division in Shan State. A UWSA spokesman subsequently confirmed the reports. Most of the detained Christian leaders were later released.¹³

DECEMBER 2018

On Christmas Eve, a mob of 50 people, including three monks in Setsi Village, Rakhine State, attacked a group of Christians during a Christmas service in a temporary shelter. One pastor was admitted to hospital with injuries sustained during the attack.¹⁴

94 ACN sources in Iraq.

95 Glen Owen and Abul Taher, "Revealed: Theresa May 'blocked asylum from Pakistani Christian' locked up for blasphemy despite UK playing host to hijackers, extremists and rapists", *MailOnline*, 24th November 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6425339/Theresa-blocked-asylum-application-Pakistani-Christian.html>

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CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

The massacre of more than 110 people, mostly Christians – including two priests and a pastor – at a Church-run displacement camp¹ highlighted the scale of the internal conflict afflicting the country. The attack in late 2018 was one of many acts of violence by ex-Séléka militia, which carried out attacks along sectarian lines. Muslim communities had also suffered, with reports of a “violent wave of ethnic cleansing”² in the west of the country. Anti-balaka militia groups, formed to fight the ex-Séléka, were themselves implicated in civilian attacks. Bishop Juan José Aguirre Muñoz of Bangassou told ACN that foreign mercenaries entering CAR to raid its natural resources had further destabilised the situation.³ A February 2019 peace deal between the government and 14 armed groups has already come under strain – with one former Séléka faction pulling out in March.⁴

“ The attackers simply fired indiscriminately on the people ”

MAY 2018

At least 19 people including Father Albert Baba were killed and about 120 injured in an attack during Mass on 1st May at Our Lady of Fatima’s Church, Bangui. Parish priest Father Moses Oti said attackers “outnumbered the police and the police retreated. Then the attackers started shooting at the church and throwing hand grenades at the people.”⁵

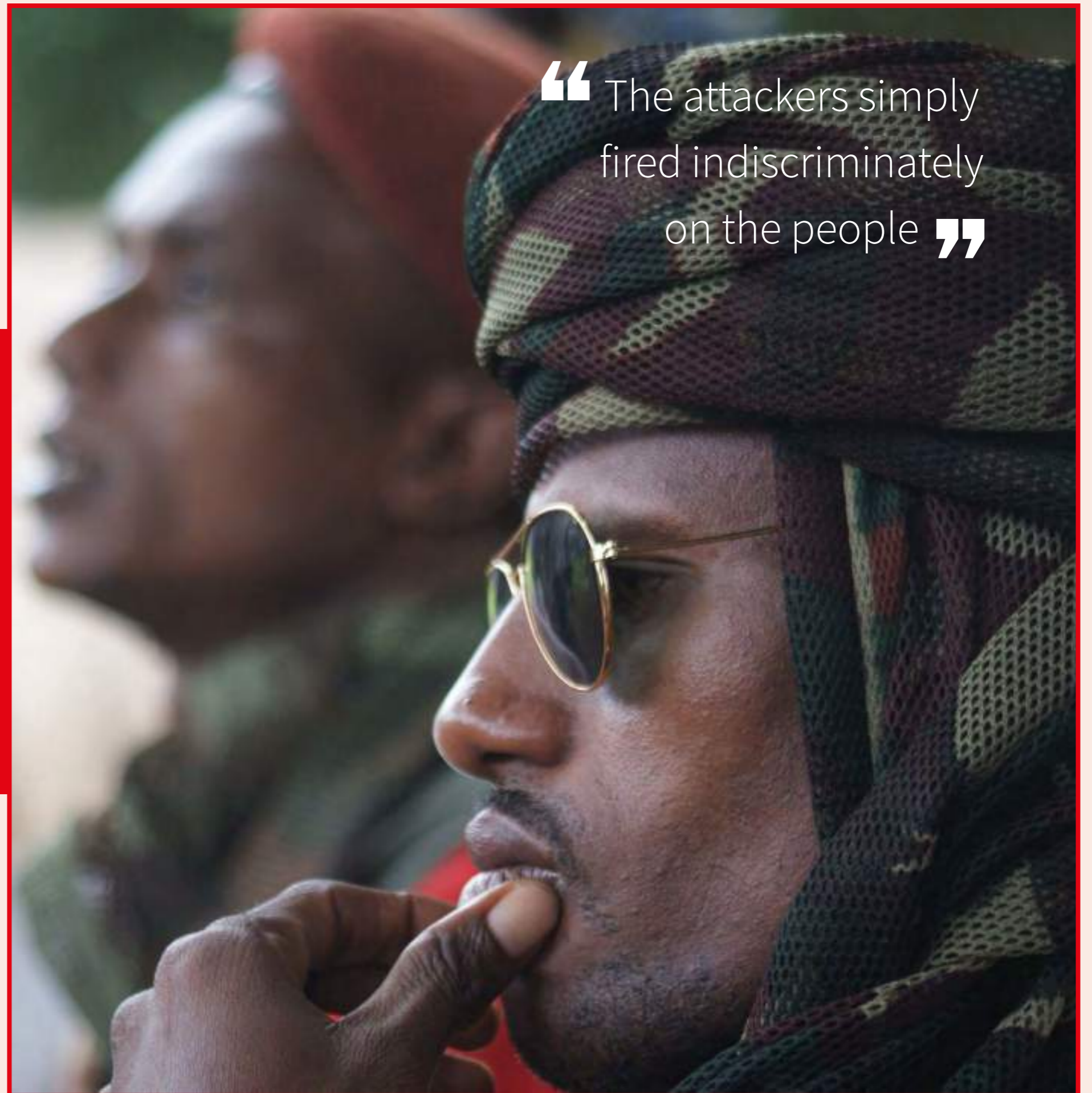
NOVEMBER 2018

101 Christians and 11 Muslims were killed when an ex-Séléka group called the Union for Peace attacked a Church-run IDP camp in Alindao. Among those killed in the massacre on the 15th November were Pastor Gabriel Singa and two priests, Father Mada Blaise and Father Célestin Ngoumango. The camp, which sheltered over 26,000 people, was totally destroyed. Bishop Cyr-Nestor Yapaupa of Alindao said: “The old people and the handicapped were simply burned alive, if they were not already shot dead or beheaded. . . The attackers simply fired indiscriminately on the people.” UN troops allegedly colluded with militants.⁶

MAY 2019

The body of 77-year-old Sister Ines Nieves Sancho was found beheaded and mutilated in Nola, south-west CAR near the border with Chad. During the night of 19th-20th May, assailants entered her home and, dragging her to the workshop where she held sewing lessons for local girls, slit her throat. Ex-Séléka militants, calling themselves 3R, were blamed for the attack.⁷

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CHINA

Difficulties for believers have increased as the new 2018 Regulations on Religious Affairs limit many religious activities to registered sites and introduce further restrictions.¹ On 21st March 2018 oversight of religious affairs was transferred from the State Administration of Religious Affairs to the United Front Work Department, an agency of the Chinese Communist Party.² There are fears that China's new "social credit system" – designed to reward good citizenship and punish bad – will be used to discriminate against Christians.³ Education is used as a tool of social conditioning: in some regions pupils were reportedly required to sign a statement saying they will "promote atheism, and oppose belief in God".⁴ In other areas problems continue. Christian clergy are still subject to arbitrary arrest⁵ and building regulations are increasingly used as a pretext for church demolitions. Despite the September 2018 agreement between the Vatican and China, the Catholic Church's status continues to be complex: two underground bishops were formally replaced by bishops from the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association; and even after the agreement, state agents destroyed Marian shrines in Shanxi and Guizhou.⁶



APRIL 2018

The Bible was banned from sale online⁷ ahead of a new version compatible with Sinicisation and socialism.⁸

NOVEMBER 2018

Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin of Wenzhou was arrested for the fifth time in two years. Reports suggested that the bishop of the "underground" Catholic Church would be held in isolation and subject to indoctrination in Communist ideology for 10-15 days. After he was seized in May 2017, he was detained for 7 months.⁹

FEBRUARY 2019

At 8pm on the evening of Sunday 24th, 44 members of the Early Rain Covenant Church – including 11 children – were taken into custody in Chengdu city. Two members, "Tang Chunliang and his wife were hit in the face by a plainclothes police officer at the police station". One officer savagely beat the pastor's mother, grabbing her hair and kicking her, while another held her down. Most members were released in the early hours of Monday between 2am and 6am, 11 were placed in administrative detention. In December 2018 local authorities had formally closed the church, arresting Pastor Wang-Yi and 160 Christians, for "inciting subversion of state power".¹⁰

MARCH 2019

Chinese officials in Guangzhou city introduced cash rewards for those who inform on underground churches and other "unofficial" places of worship. Those with useful information will receive 100 yuan (£11), which could rise to 10,000 yuan – about two months' average salary – for those who help identify and arrest ministers and members from unofficial religious groups.¹¹

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EGYPT

The number of major bomb attacks on churches in Egypt has fallen compared to the previous two years when explosions struck at the heart of the Coptic Christian community, killing and maiming Mass-goers at the country's most important cathedrals in Cairo and Alexandria.¹ That said, several egregious attacks did take place, including the November 2018 attack on a bus carrying Christian pilgrims.² The decline in violent acts suggested progress was being made in President al-Sisi's stated determination to deal with Daesh (ISIS), which claimed responsibility for many of the attacks. In January 2019 a bomb plot was foiled when Imam Saad Askar reacted promptly to mosque-goers' reports of suspicious activity near the Virgin Mary and Abu Seifin Church, Nasr City.³ More than a week earlier, a police officer was killed defusing a bomb near a church in another of Cairo's suburbs.⁴ Meanwhile, protests against Church buildings continue to occur – a problem which has apparently worsened since the government made it easier to secure legal approval for church buildings.⁵ Coptic Christian women and girls continue to be abducted for forced conversion and marriage.



DECEMBER 2017

Nine people were confirmed dead when at least two gunmen attacked Mar Mina Coptic church in the Helwan district, south of Cairo. Those killed included members of the congregation and a police officer involved in a shootout. A number of others were injured, many of them guards protecting the church. Government security said one of the terrorists "was going to blow himself up using a suicide belt". Afterwards, explosives experts dismantled two improvised explosive devices near the church.⁶

NOVEMBER 2018

Seven people were killed and 19 were wounded when Muslim extremists ambushed three buses carrying Christian pilgrims going to a remote monastery south of Cairo. According to the Coptic Orthodox Church, all but one of those killed were members of the same family. Among the dead were a boy aged 15 and a 12-year-old girl. Daesh claimed responsibility for the attack, which it said was revenge against the Egyptian authorities for jailing "our chaste sisters".⁷

JANUARY 2019

Police closed down the only church in Manshiyet Zaafarana village, Minya, leaving 1,000 Copts without a place of worship. Muslim residents surrounded the building and demanded that it be shut, using what the Archdiocese of Minya described as "offensive and inflammatory" language. Reportedly, police were conciliatory to protestors and closed the building. The church building had been stormed a few days earlier on 7th January 2019, just hours after Christmas Mass. Police ejected the protestors.⁸

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INDIA

During the period under examination, attacks on Christians were reported in 24 of India's 29 states. According to one calculation, there were 440 anti-Christian incidents in 2017, 477 in 2018 and 117 in the first quarter of 2019.¹ Attacks include the killing of converts² and sexual violence, such as the gang-rape of five women working for a Christian NGO in Jharkhand.³ More than 100 churches closed in 2018, because of extremist attacks or intervention by authorities.⁴ According to one study, not only has communal violence remained high, but the failure of authorities to address attacks on religious minorities has engendered a climate of impunity.⁵ “[G]roups and organisations wishing to promote cultural and religious nationalism are becoming bolder,” said Bishop Theodore Mascarenhas of the Indian Catholic Bishops’ Conference.⁶ Census data showing the number of Hindus has fallen below 80 percent sparked concern among nationalists who believe forced conversions are changing society. During May 2018 elections in Karnataka, a fake letter from Archbishop Machado of Bangalore circulated, claiming the Catholic Church was planning to proselytise the Lingayat Hindu community.⁷ Nine of India’s 29 states have laws “restricting religious conversions”.⁸

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SEPTEMBER 2018

An elderly Christian woman was beaten in Veppur village, Tamil Nadu, on the festival of Ganesh Chaturthi (13th September). Four worshippers from a group carrying a statue of Ganesh stopped her, saying that, by walking on the road, she had made it impure and defiled the festival. They hurled stones at Christians who tried to rescue her – 10 suffered minor injuries. One resident said: “They tell us, ‘We belong to [Hindu extremist group] RSS, and you are Christians. We cannot both walk on the same road...’”⁹

FEBRUARY 2019

A 40-strong mob attacked Philadelphia Church, Karkeli village, near Chhattisgarh State’s capital, Raipur, on 3rd February. Worshippers were beaten with sticks – 15 required hospital treatment. Politicians were accused of inciting villagers to attack the church. According to reports, Hindu villagers cut Christians off from the village’s water supply, banned them from burying their dead, and refused to give them jobs after they declined to participate in Hindu practices. Police investigating the attack allegedly told Christians they would be driven out if they continued to preach.¹⁰

MAY 2019

Local officials sent 50 workers to demolish a church-run school and hostel for tribal children near Lichapeta village, Odisha State. Headmaster Vijay Kumar Pusuru said: “When we protested peacefully, they beat us”. Problems started after a leader of the local Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) group alleged the school was evangelising the children – a claim Pusuru denies. Demolition was ordered after authorities “lost” the papers relating to the school’s land allotment application. 100 of the school’s 250 pupils lived in the hostel, with 12 children who were left homeless by the hostel’s destruction taken into care.¹¹

IRAQ

Christians slowly returned to their towns and villages in the Nineveh Plains following Daesh (ISIS)’s attempt to eliminate Christianity. During an October 2018 visit to the UK organised by ACN, Chaldean Archbishop Habib Nafali said Iraq’s Christians had endured systematic violence designed to eradicate them: “If this is not genocide, then what is genocide?”¹ His sentiments were echoed by Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphael I Sako.² As of June 2019, just over 46 percent of families who fled had returned – but churches lamented an apparent lack of both domestic and international aid to rebuild. Father Salar Kajo, of the Churches’ Nineveh Reconstruction Committee, said: “After a year of rebuilding, the only channel of aid has been through the Church”, adding that the Hungarian government provided direct aid.³ The process of return has been complicated by security problems, with accusations of aggression, including land grabs by militias allegedly protecting Christian settlements.⁴ Widespread problems confront the country’s Christian communities, including additional taxes levied on Christian-majority areas in the Kurdish autonomous region,⁵ lack of support for those who suffered sexual violence,⁶ accounts of at least 350 Christian-owned properties being illegally seized,⁷ and the sporadic killings of Christians and members of other minorities.⁸

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DECEMBER 2017

MP Joseph Silewa complained of Christians in Qaraqosh and Bartella being harassed – and in some cases sexually assaulted – by members of the Shabak-Shi’a Popular Mobilisation Forces’ (PMF) 30th Brigade. The Kurdistan Regional Government’s Director General of Christian Affairs confirmed that there had been harassment and abuse by the PMF and other militia groups following the liberation of the Nineveh Plains from Daesh.⁹

MARCH 2018

Dr Hisham Shafiq was stabbed to death along with his wife and elderly mother in their home in Baghdad. Father Biyos Qasha feared these events were part a plan to force Christians from their homes.¹⁰

JANUARY 2019

The Ministry of Education’s new curriculum was condemned by Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphael I Sako. He said: “I read inaccurate, inappropriate and offensive statements that incite hatred and division, which are far from the values of tolerance and the principles of citizenship and coexistence.” For example, the textbooks for children aged 6-11 say unveiled women are “sick.”¹¹

APRIL 2019

A gun attack on a Palm Sunday procession in Bartella forced Christians to abandon the traditional ceremonial start to Holy Week. Cars drove alongside the procession while those inside opened fire. Fewer than a third of 3,800 Christian families that left Bartella have returned, and the Shabak-Shi’a militias, which control the town’s security, have reportedly harassed Christians, including firing guns in front of St George’s Church for more than an hour and threatening its priest Father Behnam Benoka.¹²



NIGERIA

“There is a clear agenda – to Islamise all of the areas that are currently predominantly Christian.”¹ This analysis, given by Bishop Wilfred Anagbe of Mukurdi, came amid reports suggesting that over the period under review there was an upsurge in the number and severity of attacks against Christians in the Middle Belt region. Although the context of this violence was complex, with ethnic rivalries, climate change and an increasingly desperate search for fresh pastures each playing a part, militant Islamist Fulani herdsmen were held responsible for the attacks, clearly displaying virulent religious hatred. Such was evident from the violence, which included an April 2018 gun attack at a village church in Benue State that left 19 people dead, including two priests. Reports for that year indicated “a rise”² in attacks both by the Fulani and by militant Islamist group Boko Haram, active especially in north-east Nigeria. The following year, clergy were reporting that attacks against Christians were “growing in ferocity and frequency”³ – with Fulani attacks now outnumbering those by Boko Haram. By then, there was declining confidence that the government of Muhammadu Buhari, re-elected President in February 2019, was winning the battle against militant Islamist insurgency, with bishops calling for him to “consider stepping aside”.⁴

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3. John Newton and Roman Kris, “Attacks on Nigeria’s Christians are growing”, *Aid to the Church in Need (UK) News*, 7th June 2019, <https://acnuk.org/news/attacks-on-nigerias-christians-are-growing/>
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FEBRUARY 2018

Islamist militants kidnapped about 110 students from a college in Dapchi, Yobe State, in north-east Nigeria on 19th February 2018, releasing all of them within one month, except one, 14-year-old Leah Sharibu, the only Christian among them. After their release, some of the girls said Leah had been held back because she had refused to abandon her Christian faith. At the time of writing, more than 18 months after she was kidnapped, Leah Sharibu is still held captive.⁵

FEBRUARY-MARCH 2019

According to reports more than 280 people were killed in a spate of attacks on predominantly Christian settlements across Kaduna State by Fulani herdsmen. Sexual assaults and maimings were also reported. This included the deaths of at least 120 members of the Adara ethnic group in Kajuru, apparently killed in the reprisal attacks that followed state governor El-Rufai’s TV announcement that 66 Fulani had been killed by Adara. El-Rufai later claimed the Fulani death toll had risen to 130. His claims were widely questioned.⁶

APRIL 2019

Boko Haram militants went from door to door on the evening of 29th April 2019, killing up to 25 people in a largely Christian community in Kuda, near Madagali, in Adamawa State, north-east Nigeria. The next day, as survivors began burying their dead, the Islamist militants “were spotted approaching for a second attack,” prompting local people to flee. Following the attack, more Christians fled Kuda.⁷



NORTH KOREA

North Korea is widely considered the most dangerous place to be a Christian, with reportedly the world’s worst record regarding religious freedom.¹ Citizens must show devotion to the ruling Kim family and the regime. Suspected disloyalty – including profession of Christianity, which is seen as “Western” – is severely punished. Defectors have described how, if caught, Christians face torture. Many are sent to Kwalliso camps for political prisoners. Between 50-70,000 Christians could be present in these camps, comprising up to half of those held there. One estimate suggests that 75 percent of Christians die from the camps’ harsh treatment.² There they have suffered extra-judicial killings, forced labour, torture, persecution, starvation, rape, forced abortion and sexual violence.³ Believers have been “hung on a cross over fire, crushed under a steamroller, hurled off bridges, trampled underfoot.”⁴ After Kim Jong-un took power as Supreme Leader, up to 80 Christians were reportedly executed in a stadium, some of them for owning Bibles.⁵

North Korea’s ‘Songbun’ system – which categorises people according to their loyalty to the regime, and determines access to necessities such as health care – classifies Christians as ‘hostile’. The four official churches in Pyongyang are regarded as show churches for the benefit of foreign visitors.⁶

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4. Christian Solidarity Worldwide, *Total Denial North Korea 2016 report*, p.16.
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DECEMBER 2017

A report by the International Bar Association’s War Crimes Committee stated “Christians are heavily persecuted and receive especially harsh treatment in prison camps”, noting that they have been “tortured and killed” for religious affiliation, attending Christian meetings, or reading the Bible and are “subjected to more severe deprivation”. North Korean defectors reported atrocities including a prisoner’s new-born baby being fed to guard dogs, the execution of starving prisoners caught digging for edible plants, and forced abortions.⁷

FEBRUARY 2019

A defector in Seoul spoke about a fellow inmate, Hyun, who told guards about her Faith, insisting on using her baptismal name during questioning in 2004. “She told [the interrogators], ‘I’m a child of God and I’m not scared to die. So if you want to kill me, go ahead and kill me.’” The defector described seeing Hyun returning from interrogation with severe bruising on her forehead and bleeding from her nose. Guards later took her away and she was not seen again.⁸

FEBRUARY 2019

The account of a North Korean prisoner was published by Open Doors. Prisoner 42 said she was asked every day if she was a Christian. “If I admit it, I will be killed. Every day, I’m beaten... They force me to sit on my knees with closed fists, never allowed to open them.” She was sentenced to a re-education camp. Another believer she met there was taken away and never seen again.⁹



SRI LANKA

Following the end of the civil war in 2009, attacks on both Christians and Muslims have risen – largely carried out by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists. However, during the period under review there have also been increasing attacks on churches by Hindu extremist groups in Eastern Province.¹ Ninety attacks on Christians were recorded in 2017,² with 67 between January and September 2018 alone.³ Discrimination against Christians included assaults on churches, denial of burial in public cemeteries,⁴ and refusals to enrol Christian children in school.⁵

Some of the most notorious attacks occurred after the beginning of the Sinhalese New Year. On Palm Sunday 2019 – which coincided with New Year itself – a nationalist mob surrounded the Methodist Church in Anuradhapura and made “murderous threats” to Bishop Asiri Perera and his congregation, pelting the building with stones and firecrackers.⁶ But by far the worst attack occurred a week later when Islamist extremists targeted Christian Churches with bomb attacks on Easter Sunday.

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JUNE 2017

Government minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakse threatened to debar human-rights lawyer Lakshan Dias unless he retracted the claim that 195 anti-Christian incidents occurred from 2015 to June 2017. Mr Dias made the statement on a TV talk show on 14th June. Mr Rajapakse said: “He is a traitor... He is eagerly waiting to grab an opportunity to create unrest in the country.” Dias received a police summons in response to a complaint.⁷

JULY 2018

50-60 villagers carrying sticks and rods surrounded Harvest Mission Church in Kiran, Batticaloa District during their Sunday service. Among the attackers were members of local government agency Korakallimadu Grama Niladhari. The mob said that they would attack the congregation if they did not halt their religious activities within 15 minutes. The attackers left after the pastor stopped the service.⁸

APRIL 2019

More than 300 people, including at least 45 children, were killed and more than 500 people injured in bomb attacks on three churches and hotels across Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday. Explosions hit St Anthony’s Church, Kotahena; Katuwapitiya Church, Katana; and Zion Church, Batticaloa. Islamist group Daesh (ISIS) affiliates claimed responsibility for the attacks.⁹



SUDAN

In May 2019 an announcement was made by the Transitional Military Council that Shari’a law would continue in Sudan. This provoked fear among Christians, who were hoping for an end to the violent persecution perpetrated by the now-deposed Omar al-Bashir. Shari’a law was enshrined in Sudan’s 2011 constitution. This followed South Sudan’s independence, with Christians facing poverty, war and genocide. The heaviest oppression has been in the Nuba Mountains, where Christians have endured ethnic cleansing as Arab-Sudanese try to eradicate black Sudanese with indiscriminate military attacks on Christian villages, churches, hospitals and schools. Moreover, since 2014, the conflict in South Sudan has pushed hundreds of thousands of refugees into Sudan. In October 2017, Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need reported that Christian children in Sudan’s refugee camps were being forced to say Islamic prayers to receive food rations. A source, who asked not to be named, said: “Children are conditioned to say Islamic prayers before [being] given food. This is not right.”¹

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FEBRUARY 2018

On Sunday 11th, Sudanese authorities “demolished” the Presbyterian Evangelical Church in Al Haj Yousif, Khartoum North.² Police evacuated the site, and books, chairs and other materials found inside were confiscated. Church leaders said a Muslim “who claims ownership of the church property has forged documents showing ownership.” A court case is ongoing, contesting the scheduled demolition. Church authorities claimed the Church had owned the property since 1989 and that a judge confirmed its ownership only the year before.³

OCTOBER 2018

Sudanese security raided a Christian house church in Nyala city, South Darfur and “subjected the converts from Islam in the group to a day and night of beating and torture.”⁴ The African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies said the accused were later released after recanting their faith. The pastor was released on bail the following day, charged with apostasy after refusing to renounce Christianity. Those found guilty of apostasy are liable for the death penalty.⁵

MARCH 2019

More than 70 churches have been attacked with 32 of them burnt down, in Sudan’s Nuba Mountains over the last 12 months, according to the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART).⁶ HART claimed the churches were attacked by Sudanese government forces as part of its struggle against the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement – North (SPLM–N). General Jagot Mukwar, SPLM–N deputy chair, said: “The government is killing its own people.”



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