

Persecuted and Forgotten?

A report on Christians
oppressed for their Faith
2015 17 **Executive Summary**



Aid to the
Church in Need

ACN UNITED STATES

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Read the Executive Summary *Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2015–17* at
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Persecuted and Forgotten? compiled by John Pontifex, John Newton and Clare Creegan.

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Aid to the Church in Need is a papal agency serving the pastoral and humanitarian needs of the persecuted and suffering Church.

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Cover image shows crucifix from the Church of St Teresa of the Child Jesus, Berhampur Diocese, India destroyed in August 2008 during anti-Christian attacks in Odisha State. All Photos © Aid to the Church in Need except: picture of Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin (© AsiaNews.it); Rev Gandham Padma Rao (© Morning Star News); Mrs Dorkas Zakka (© Father Andrew Yeycock), by kind permission of the Zakka family.

At-a-glance summary of findings

Period under review: August 2015 – July 2017

- ▶ In almost all the countries reviewed, the situation for Christians has declined since 2015 as a result of violence and oppression. This is especially significant given the rate of decline in the immediate run-up to the period under review. The one exception is Saudi Arabia, where the situation was already so bad it could scarcely get any worse.
- ▶ In Iraq, the exodus of Christians has continued to be very severe, but hope is on the horizon with communities returning to their homes.
- ▶ This same exodus is threatening the survival of Christianity in parts of Syria including Aleppo, formerly home to one of the largest Christian communities in the whole of the Middle East.
- ▶ Daesh (ISIS) and other Islamist militant groups have committed genocide in Syria and Iraq.
- ▶ Governments in the West and the UN failed to offer Christians in countries such as Iraq and Syria the emergency help they needed as genocide got underway. If Christian organizations and other institutions had not filled the gap, the Christian presence could already have disappeared in Iraq and other parts of the Middle East.
- ▶ The defeat of Daesh and other Islamists in major strongholds of the Middle East offers the last hope of recovery for Christian groups threatened with extinction. Many would not survive another similar violent attack.
- ▶ Daesh affiliate Boko Haram has carried out genocide against Christians in northern Nigeria.
- ▶ Christians have suffered increased violence and oppression as a result of a rise in religious nationalism. In India, for example, persecution has risen sharply since the 2014 rise to power of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
- ▶ In China, where the President has described Christianity as “a foreign infiltration”, increased hostility to Church communities, accused of resisting government control, has resulted in the widespread removal of crosses from churches and the destruction of church buildings. Some regional authorities have banned Christmas trees and greetings cards.
- ▶ In worst-offending North Korea, “unspeakable atrocities” against Christians include enforced starvation, abortion and reports of faithful being hung on crosses over a fire and others being crushed under a steamroller.



Foreword by Archbishop Issam John Darwish

Melkite Greek Catholic Archbishop of Zahlé and Furzol, Lebanon

Everything is quiet in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, where I am writing this letter to you. Only from time to time can I hear the thunder of artillery from the distant fighting in neighboring Syria, as the Beqaa runs alongside the border between Lebanon and Syria. The ceasefire has stilled many of the guns that used to roar.

But we have felt the effects of the war. Refugees have made their way across the border and the Church in the Beqaa has welcomed 800 refugee families – more than 6,000 people – who fled their homeland. They left either because they were caught up in fighting between the Syrian regime and rebel forces or because they were driven out of their homes by Islamists among the rebels, who increasingly targeted the Christian community as the war continued its bloody course.

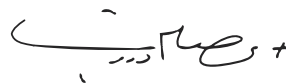
They have turned to us and we have helped them as best we can. How could we not? We remember the words of the Gospel: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?” And we remember too the reply the Son of Man gives: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Matt 25: 37-38, 40)

When the Christian families who have turned to us need the very basics for daily life – food, shelter and medical care – how can we refuse to help? Until now, the UN and other humanitarian organizations have provided no aid and so we have opened our homes and hearts to them.

Many refugees have told terrible stories of persecution: like the man whose brother, a priest, was kidnapped – and despite the family paying the ransom they killed the priest. They sent his family a box containing his severed wrist, tattooed with a cross, to show he was dead.

However, as this *Persecuted and Forgotten?* report describes, these acts of extremism are occurring not only in Syria, but also in neighboring Iraq and various African countries. Nor is extremism the only problem facing our brothers and sisters, and in places like North Korea and China they are crushed by the heavy burden of state repression and intimidation.

Yet we are aware that Aid to the Church in Need, which has produced this report, is not only interested in reporting these atrocities but also in responding wherever they can. They have been a partner helping us to feed the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, as they have also worked with the Church in Iraq and other areas to relieve the condition of those driven from their homes by extremists. They know that where we see our brothers and sisters hungry, thirsty, or naked we must minister to them, and so minister to Our Lord Jesus Christ himself.



+ Most Rev Issam John Darwish BSO, DD
Melkite Greek Catholic Archbishop
of Zahlé and Furzol, Lebanon



*Church of the Immaculate Conception, Qaraqosh on Iraq's Nineveh Plains shortly after its liberation from Daesh (ISIS).
Photo: Jako Klamer / ACN*

Persecuted and Forgotten?

A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2015–17 Executive Summary

“Christians are pigs. You don’t deserve to live.”

These were the words of an extremist militant spoken to Christian man Elia Gargous, kidnapped by Islamist militia Al Nusra Front, outside Rableh, western Syria. In an interview with Aid to the Church in Need in February 2016, Mr. Gargous described how he and his nephew, also called Elia, were abducted along with 213 others.¹ Mr. Gargous said they were bound and gagged before being taken to what turned out to be St. Elias’s Convent, two miles from Rableh. There, their blindfolds were removed and they watched helplessly as icons were smashed on the ground in front of them. Mr. Gargous said: **“They told us to convert but we refused. They killed people in front of us.”** A huge ransom was demanded for their release. Now back with his family, having found sanctuary in neighboring Lebanon, Mr. Gargous was quick to stress his gratitude to friends and family who had exhausted their resources in funding his release. But while his time in captivity was mercifully brief, Mr. Gargous said that the sheer cruelty and barbarity of individuals and groups driven by religious hatred would remain with him forever.

This targeting of religious belief – driven by hatred of Christians and the faith itself – emerges as a common denominator in hundreds of testimonies of persecution received by Aid to the Church in Need from countries around the world. As a Catholic charity providing emergency and pastoral relief in 140 countries, ACN is committed to chronicling and assessing the evolving phenomenon of persecution

against Christians around the world today. Central to the process is this, the 2017 edition of *Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith*. The full report, which is available at www.acnusa.org/persecuted, shows that during the period under review – August 2015 to July 2017 – persecution against Christians in the worst-affected regions reached a new peak, the impact of which is only now beginning to be felt in all its horror.

The gravity of the persecution of Christians had been clearly established prior to the period under review.² In April 2017, the Pew Research Center released a report showing that the number of countries where Christians fell victim to government restrictions and social hostilities grew from 108 in 2014 to 128 the following year.³ In its World Watch Monitor Report, covering 2016, Open Doors, an organization supporting persecuted Christians, found that: “More than 200 million Christians in the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian experience persecution because of their faith.”⁴ Other sources claimed that the true figure for 2016 may be as high as 600 million.⁵ Although the precise number of Christians persecuted for

² Daniel Philpott “Why Christians Deserve Attention”, Religious Freedom Project, Berkley Center, Georgetown University, 02/09/14 <<https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/essays/why-christians-deserve-attention>>. As far back as 2009, the International Society for Human Rights, a secular NGO based in Frankfurt, Germany, estimated that Christians are the victims of 80 percent of all acts of religious discrimination in the world.

³ Pew Research Center, *Global Restrictions on Religion Rise Modestly in 2015, Reversing Downward Trend*, 11/04/17 <<http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/11/global-restrictions-on-religion-rise-modestly-in-2015-reversing-downward-trend/>>; Bob Unruh, “Pew: Christians Harassed in 128 Nations”, WND, 11/04/17 <<http://www.wnd.com/2017/04/pew-christians-harassed-in-128-nations/>>

⁴ Open Doors, *World Watch Report 2017: The Persecution of Christians and Global Displacement*, January 2017 <<http://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/documents/wwl-report-2017.pdf>>

⁵ Center for Studies on New Religions <<http://www.cesnur.org/>>

¹ Elia Gargous’ interview with John Pontifex cited in *Syria: “I was hungry and you fed me”* (ACN (UK), March 2016), pp. 2-3

their faith remains unclear, reports showing a fall in the number of deaths during the period under review to below 100,000 nevertheless highlight that the violence against followers of Jesus Christ remains severe.⁶

“In 12 of the 13 countries reviewed, the situation for Christians was worse in overall terms in the period 2015–17 than within the preceding two years.”

The primary focus of this report

Persecuted and Forgotten? 2015–17 assesses both the nature of the threats to Christians and the underlying causes. It identifies trends and, where possible, predicts future developments. The report assesses the situation in 13 countries – fewer than previous editions, which looked at 20 or more – to enable a closer focus on some of the countries where persecution of Christians is most serious. By no means exhaustive, the research revealed evidence of the most serious persecution against Christians in terms of violations of fundamental human rights: violence, including rape, unlawful detention, unfair trial, prevention of religious assembly and peaceful (religious) expression. The list of countries includes those where the principal perpetrator of persecution is the state (an obvious example being North Korea), others where societal groups are mostly to blame (such as Daesh (ISIS)

⁶ Center for Studies on New Religions, <<http://www.cesnur.org/>>; Perry Chiaramonte, “Christians the most persecuted group in world for second year: Study,” 06/01/17 <<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/01/06/christians-most-persecuted-group-in-world-for-second-year-study.html>>

in Iraq and Syria) and others where it is a combination of the two (Pakistan). Also included is Turkey. While this country is not in the top tier of persecution, its relevance to issues affecting Christians in the wider Middle East inevitably renders it virtually indispensable to any appropriately in-depth analysis of the subject.

The report harnesses on-the-ground research gathered by Aid to the Church in Need. This material is firstly drawn from fact-finding and project-assessment trips to some of the areas worst affected by persecution, for example Aleppo in Syria, parts of Iraq, Pakistan and Sudan – and other destinations which cannot be revealed because of security implications.

Taken as a whole, this evaluation cannot, by its nature, set out to be entirely 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 invariably not uniform across any one particular country.

The research shows that in the 2015–17 period, Christians have suffered crimes against humanity: some were hanged or crucified (*See case study opposite, ‘Syria: Man bound hand and foot to a cross’*), others raped, some kidnapped and never seen again. Modern technology and social media have played an increasing part in the spread of information about persecution, but they have also become a part of the problem, spreading propaganda for extremist groups.

Persecuted and Forgotten? 2015–17: the main findings

In terms of the numbers of people involved, the gravity of the crimes committed and their impact, it is clear that **the persecution of Christians is today worse than at any time in history. Not only are Christians more persecuted than any other faith group, but ever-increasing numbers are experiencing the very worst forms of**

Syria: Man bound hand and foot to a cross

January 2017: Christian man Elias described how he was bound to a cross by Daesh (ISIS) forces in Raqqa, northern Syria – but escaped when a bomb forced his jailers to flee. When Aid to the Church in Need visited Elias in Syria, he said Daesh seized him for failing to keep up the Islamic *jizya* payments imposed on Christians in Raqqa. Elias said his income ceased after a bomb injury prevented him from working as a car mechanic. Angered by his inability to pay, Daesh threw his statues of the Virgin Mary in the trash. When Elias protested, the Daesh fighters hit him on the head. He was jailed for defending himself and was tied hand and foot to a cross in a solitary cell. He was fed moldy bread for several days before being told his throat would be slit. A bomb blast caused his captors to flee and Elias was reunited with his wife, Samar. Rescuing their statues of the Virgin Mary, the couple hitched a ride to Aleppo where they were cared for by ACN aid coordinator Sister Annie Demerjian and her volunteers. *Names have been changed to protect Elias and Samar's missing teenage children – Rima, 18, and Youhanna, 17 – who are being held by Daesh.*



A volunteer who cares for Christian families in Aleppo, Syria holds one of Elias's statues.



Egypt: Suicide bombers strike during Mass

December 2016: In Cairo, at least 29 people were killed and more than 50 people were injured when a suicide bomber struck during Sunday Mass. Following the attack at Sts. Peter and Paul Coptic Orthodox Church, next to St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral, Daesh (ISIS) claimed responsibility, stating on Facebook that similar attacks would continue "against every infidel and apostate in Egypt, and everywhere." Egyptian Catholic bishops' spokesman Father Rafic Graiche told Aid to the Church in Need: "There is a feeling among many who attend Mass that under the seat there is a bomb." Four months later, in April 2017, on Palm Sunday suicide bombers targeted two churches in Alexandria and Tanta, resulting in 44 dead and more than 120 injured.

Sources: New York Times, 12/13/16; Egypt: Church of Martyrs (ACN): August 2017)

persecution. It is in this context that this report concludes that **in 12 of the 13 countries reviewed, the situation for Christians was worse in overall terms in the period 2015–17 than within the preceding two years.** An especially notable example of this was China where intolerance was on the rise, as evidenced by a renewed clampdown on dissident clergy and destruction of churches as well as crosses and other Christian symbols. In many countries the

situation was already so severe, it could scarcely get any worse, and yet it did – the obvious exception being Saudi Arabia, where a long-established pattern of some of the world's worst oppression saw no obvious indications of deterioration. In two cases, the decline was so marked the countries dropped a category – India, changing from 'high' to 'high to extreme' and Turkey, from 'moderate' to 'moderate to high'. Elsewhere, in countries such as Syria and Iraq, the

“In Iraq, figures for the Christian population showed a decline from 275,000 in mid-2015 to below 200,000 two years later.”

worsening situation facing Christians during the period under review was primarily related to the impact of a surge in violence and intimidation which had peaked in preceding years, namely 2013-15. **In both of these countries and in certain others, the overall situation for Christians was worse than in the previous two years, even though by summer 2017 the violence had reduced markedly. This relates to crucial factors showing the profound impact of persecution, especially the ensuing displacement of Christians, the political consequences of destabilization and the loss of morale among the Church communities.**

The imminent threat of wipe-out

The most significant factor in this context is undoubtedly the enforced exodus of Christians. In Syria, the decimation of the Church community was profound. While figures for the country as a whole are disputed, it is notable that by March 2016, Chaldean Bishop Antoine Audo of Aleppo was claiming that Syria's Christians now numbered 500,000, a fall of 1.2 million – or two-thirds within five years.⁷ The decline was especially marked in certain towns and cities, for which more specific data had been collected. Syria's second city of

⁷ Stoyan Zamov, "66 percent of Syrian Christians Gone, Chaldean Catholic Bishop Says Amid Civil War", *Christian Post*, 03/17/16 <<http://www.christianpost.com/news/66-percent-of-syrian-christians-gone-chaldean-catholic-bishop-says-amid-civil-war-159400/>>

Aleppo, until 2011 home to the country's largest Christian community of 150,000, saw an exodus of faithful, with numbers dropping to barely 35,000⁸ by spring 2017, a fall of more than 75 percent. While the exodus was undoubtedly driven by the ongoing civil war, the part played by specific targeting of Christians should not be underestimated. This would help explain the disproportionate decline in their number as compared with the overall population, which in the case of Aleppo had fallen by perhaps 25 percent in the same period.⁹

In Iraq, meanwhile, figures for the Christian population showed a decline from 275,000¹⁰ in mid-2015 to below 200,000¹¹ two years later – and possibly as few as 150,000. If this decline were to continue at the same rate, it would show that the 2015 *Persecuted and Forgotten?* report prediction of a virtual wipe-out of Iraq's Christian community by 2020 remains on track. However, fears that Christians in Iraq are "on the verge of extinction"¹² were, to some extent, alleviated at the end of the reporting period by news of thousands of families returning to their homes on the Nineveh Plains following the defeat of Daesh.

The evidence collected for this report shows that an eradication of Christians, and other minorities, was – and still is – the specific and stated objective of extremist groups at work in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere in the region, including Egypt (*See case study opposite, 'Egypt: Suicide bombers strike during Mass'*). In July 2014, barely a month after seizing Mosul in Iraq, Daesh produced a statement which was relayed on

⁸ ACN fact-finding in Aleppo by Josué Villalón <<http://melbournecatholic.org.au/International-News/helping-to-strengthen-faith-and-hope-through-sport-in-aleppo>>

⁹ World Population Review, Syria Population 2017 <<http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/syria-population/>>

¹⁰ John Pontifex, "Exodus of Biblical proportions", *The Tablet*, 12/18/14 <www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/4220/exodus-of-biblical-proportions>; John Pontifex and John Newton (ed.s), *Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2013-15 – Executive Summary* (ACN, 2015), p.17

¹¹ James Roberts, "If Christians are driven from the Middle East the West will be to blame for 'Standing by and doing nothing', says Erbil aid-coordinator", *The Tablet*, 03/20/17, <<http://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/6910/0/if-christians-are-driven-from-the-middle-east-the-west-will-be-to-blame-for-standing-by-and-doing-nothing-says-erbil-aid-coordinator>>

¹² Susan Byron, "Christians in northern Iraq 'on verge of extinction', says aid worker", *Catholic Herald*, 03/24/17 <<http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2017/03/24/christians-in-northern-iraq-on-verge-of-extinction-without-help-from-west-says-aid-worker/>>





Syria: Monastery bulldozed and the dead defiled

April 2016: When Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II visited a Syrian town just days after Daesh (ISIS) was driven out, he saw how the militants had tried to eradicate Christian symbols there. Syrian government forces ejected Daesh from Al-Qaryatayn in April 2016, nine months after the jihadists seized the town. During his visit, Patriarch Ignatius saw evidence that the jihadists had used a bulldozer to partially destroy St. Elias Monastery, which dates back more than 1,500 years.

Human bones from ancient graves could be seen within the rubble. Charred pages from ancient Christian holy books were also visible and, in the graveyard outside, gravestones had been damaged and all the crosses removed. Churches all over the area have been demolished or damaged.

Patriarch Ignatius (*pictured standing in Al-Qaryatayn's St Elias Syriac Orthodox Church*) told Aid to the Church in Need: "The residents wept when they saw what had become of their town. It was especially painful to see how the churches had been wilfully defiled by ISIS." Within 24 hours of seizing Al-Qaryatayn in August 2015, Daesh abducted 230 people – 60 of them Christians – from the town. Many were subsequently released.

Sources: Assyrian International News Agency/ Russia Today, 04/05/16 ; ACN (UK) News, 04/12/16

Nigeria: Woman killed in her kitchen on Easter night

April 2017: Christian woman Dorkas Zakka (pictured right) was among 12 people killed by Fulani herdsmen who interrupted an Easter Vigil Mass in Kafanchan state, northern Nigeria. Targeting St. John's Catholic Church, in Asso town, the anti-Christian Fulani chased the young mother back to her home and killed her on her kitchen floor. Another nine faithful were killed as they ran out of the church. St. John's parish priest Father Alexander Yeyock told Aid to the Church in Need: "I was celebrating Mass... then there was sporadic shooting." Condemning the military for failing to protect the Christian village, he said: "The military were there during the Easter Vigil attack... they didn't do anything. They allowed the Fulani herdsmen in."



Image by kind permission of the Zakka family.
© Father Alexander Yeyock

loudspeakers throughout the city. "We offer [Christians and others] three choices: Islam, the *Dhimmi* contract involving payment [of the *jizya* Islamic tax]. If they refuse this, there is nothing but the sword."¹³ When the extremists carried out a comprehensive seizure of Christian property, complete with marking Christian homes with graffiti bearing the Arabic 'n' for Nazarene, denoting Christians, it quickly became apparent that the payment option was not viable and, indeed, it was formally withdrawn.¹⁴ Unmistakable intent to erase all evidence of the Christian presence was made plain by the desecration or removal of crosses and

other symbols on church buildings¹⁵ (See case study 'Syria: Monastery bulldozed and the dead defiled' on pages 14–15). The abduction of six or more priests and bishops, including Aleppo's Archbishops Boulos Yazigi and Youhanna Ibrahim, kidnapped in April 2013, was a direct attack on the Church's structure and leadership.¹⁶ Nor were such acts of aggression confined to the living, as witnessed by Daesh's defiling of the grave of Father Salim Ganni¹⁷ at St. Addai's Church, in Karemles, a Christian town in Iraq's Nineveh

¹³ Luisa Loveluck, "Christians flee Iraq's Mosul after Islamists tell them: convert, pay or die", *Daily Telegraph*, 07/19/14
<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10977698/Christians-flee-Iraqs-Mosul-after-Islamists-tell-them-convert-pay-or-die.html>>

¹⁴ "Christians flee Mosul amid threats to convert or die", *USA Today*, 29/07/14
<<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/07/29/mosul-iraq-christians/13238013/>>

¹⁵ Associated Press, "Iraq's oldest Christian monastery that has stood 1,400 years is destroyed in seconds", *MailOnline*, 01/20/16 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3407865/Only-On-AP-Oldest-Christian-monastery-Iraq-razed.html>>

¹⁶ Ed West, "The desperate search for Syria's kidnapped clergy", *Catholic Herald*, 07/16/15 <<http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/issues/july-17th-2015/the-quest-to-find-syrias-kidnapped-priests/>>

¹⁷ Confirmed to ACN by Chaldean priest Father Nadheer Dako

“Christians in Syria and Iraq have fallen victim to genocide.”

Plains.¹⁸ Rape and sexual violence have also seemingly been part of a strategy designed to subjugate religious minorities. In June 2016, an Iraqi woman described what happened when she was caught by Daesh. She said that when they discovered she was Christian, the extremists took her and her baby to an internment camp where she was repeatedly raped. She said the same happened to other women, both Christian and Yazidi.¹⁹

Genocide of Christians

Taken as a whole, this evidence proves conclusively that Christians in Syria and Iraq have fallen victim to genocide, as defined by the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide as adopted by the United Nations.²⁰ The evidence is consistent with an “intent to destroy in whole or in part”²¹ the Christian community, and meets all the indicators set out by the convention, “any”²² one of which is sufficient to be proof of genocide, including: “a) killing members of the group, b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group and c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part”.²³ Evidence also shows Daesh activity to be

¹⁸ John Newton, *Hope on the Horizon: Can Iraq's Christians go home?*, (ACN (UK), March 2017)

¹⁹ Fox News, 06/04/16 <<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/06/04/iraqi-christian-details-how-isis-fighters-married-her-only-for-rape.html>>

²⁰ Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by Resolution 260 (111) A of the UN General Assembly on 12/09/48 <<http://preventgenocide.org/law/convention/text.htm>>

²¹ *ibid*

²² Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by Resolution 260 (111) A of the UN General Assembly on 12/09/48 <<http://preventgenocide.org/law/convention/text.htm>> Article II ‘Genocide defined’

²³ Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by Resolution 260 (111) A of the UN General Assembly on 12/09/48

consistent with the final two tests of genocide set down by the convention concerning efforts to “prevent births” and “transferring” children away. In November 2016, French Catholic priest Father Patrick Desbois described his experiences helping Christian families in Iraq and Syria, saying: “They dislocate the families, they take the newborn babies and they put them in Islamist families,” adding that the young children are trained to be terrorists. He said that “Young girls who are virgins are selected by doctors and sold”.²⁴

Genocide against Christians has also taken place in northern Nigeria, where Boko Haram, an “affiliate”²⁵ of Daesh, set about a campaign of violence to ensure the faithful “will not be able to stay”.²⁶ Islamist Fulani herdsmen, accused of colluding with “sister organization”²⁷ Boko Haram, carried out a campaign of butchery, desecration of church buildings, rape and mass expulsion of Christians (*See case study opposite, ‘Nigeria: Woman killed in her kitchen on Easter night’*). When an Aid to the Church in Need delegation visited northern Nigeria in March 2017, Church leaders handed them a dossier showing that in one diocese alone – Kafanchan – within five years, 988 people had been killed, and 71 Christian-majority villages had been destroyed, as well as 2,712 homes and 20 churches. In Maiduguri, formerly the Boko Haram heartland, the diocesan officials reported that 1.8 million people had been displaced, 5,000 women had become widows and 15,000 children were now orphans. Damage had been done to 200 churches and chapels as well as 35 presbyteries and parish centers.²⁸

For Christians in Syria and Iraq at least, one ray of light came in spring 2016 with an international political campaign to achieve recognition of

<<http://preventgenocide.org/law/convention/text.htm>>

²⁴ Christian Post, 11/11/16 <<http://www.christianpost.com/news/isis-taking-newborn-babies-virgin-girls-annihilate-christians-says-catholic-priest-171448/>>

²⁵ Tomi Oladipo, “Analysis: Islamic State strengthens ties with Boko Haram”, BBC News, 24/04/15 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-32435614>>

²⁶ Christian Post, 14/06/12 <<http://www.christianpost.com/news/boko-haram-explains-attacking-christians-desire-for-an-islamic-nigeria-76669/>>

²⁷ ACN (UK) News, 27/04/17 <<https://acnuk.org/news/nigeria-is-the-government-complicit-in-the-supply-of-arms-to-islamists/>>

²⁸ ACN Communication Trip – Nigeria, March 2017, Travel Report by Maria Lozano



Iraq: Young priest restores faith in desecrated village

March 2017: Newly ordained priest Father Martin Banni (*pictured below*) returned with the Blessed Sacrament to his church in Karemlas in the ancient Nineveh Plains, northern Iraq, following the expulsion of Daesh (ISIS).



In a message to Aid to the Church in Need, the priest described the welcome he received from his flock, who were beginning to return after more than two years living in displacement in Kurdish northern Iraq. Fr. Martin wrote: “I was the first priest to bless the people in the church in my home village in northern Iraq.”

The priest recalled how, on the night of August 6, 2014, he whisked the Blessed Sacrament to safety as he fled Karemlas, just before Daesh stormed in.

Fr. Martin’s return to Karemlas in spring 2017 came amid plans involving Aid to the Church in Need to enable Christians to return to the Nineveh Plains with an emphasis on repairing thousands of homes damaged by Daesh. The program follows a massive ongoing emergency relief operation for the 120,000 displaced Christians and others in Kurdish northern Iraq.

genocide. The European Parliament and the UK House of Commons were among those to endorse the genocide claim, and momentum climaxed in March 2016, when, following a unanimous pro-genocide vote in the US House of Representatives, US Secretary of State John Kerry declared that Daesh was “genocidal by self-proclamation, by ideology, and by its actions – in what it says, what it believes and what it does”.²⁹

Government failure to act

Since then, progress has stalled. **Failure by governments to take the necessary steps to stop genocide and bring the perpetrators to justice – as set out in the genocide convention – represented a significant setback for suffering Christians.** Church leaders and faithful noted with increasing alarm and despair apparent inaction by the authorities to provide for Christian victims of genocide escaping Daesh and other extremists in Mosul and the Nineveh Plains, and those in Lebanon, Jordan and elsewhere unable to access the UN and other official camps. On-the-ground research by Aid to the Church in Need revealed that in at least one UN camp the coordinator had insisted on Christians adopting Muslim customs as a condition of entry.³⁰ For their part, Christians themselves – especially women afraid of rape – described to ACN their concerns that going to the camps would put them in personal danger. ACN met families in Zahle, Lebanon, who preferred living up to 15 to a room in the basement of a Christian home to moving into the camps. Bishops and other Church leaders spoke of problems for Christians who did not want to enter the camps and who had been refused registration.³¹ The overall effect of this was to prompt an increased exodus of Christians from the region, thereby reducing the possibility of a large-scale return of Christians to their homelands should the situation improve.

²⁹ Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, “John Kerry: ISIS Is Responsible for Genocide Against Christians”, *Christian Today*, 17/03/16 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/march/do-christians-face-genocide-isis-john-kerry-syria-iraq.html>>

³⁰ Information from fact-finding trip to Syria and Lebanon by John Pontifex and other ACN staff, January-February 2016, including visit to camps and Christian families in Zahlé, Lebanon

³¹ Catholic News Agency, 07/01/14 <<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/lebanese-bishop-appeals-for-christian-syrian-refugees/>>

This has put Christians at a profound disadvantage at a time when Daesh and other extremist groups have lost the vast majority of their territory in Iraq and Syria. Prospects for Christians to go back home inevitably suffered, given the extent of the exodus. But it was not all bad news. **In the absence of help from government, Church organizations’ efforts to provide for displaced and refugee communities** began to achieve their ultimate goal when plans started to be rolled out to enable Christians to go back to their homelands (*See case study opposite, ‘Iraq: Young priest restores faith in desecrated village’*). By mid-2017, hundreds of families had begun returning from displacement in Kurdish northern Iraq to their towns and villages in the Nineveh Plains, including the worst-affected towns, such as Qaraqosh.³²

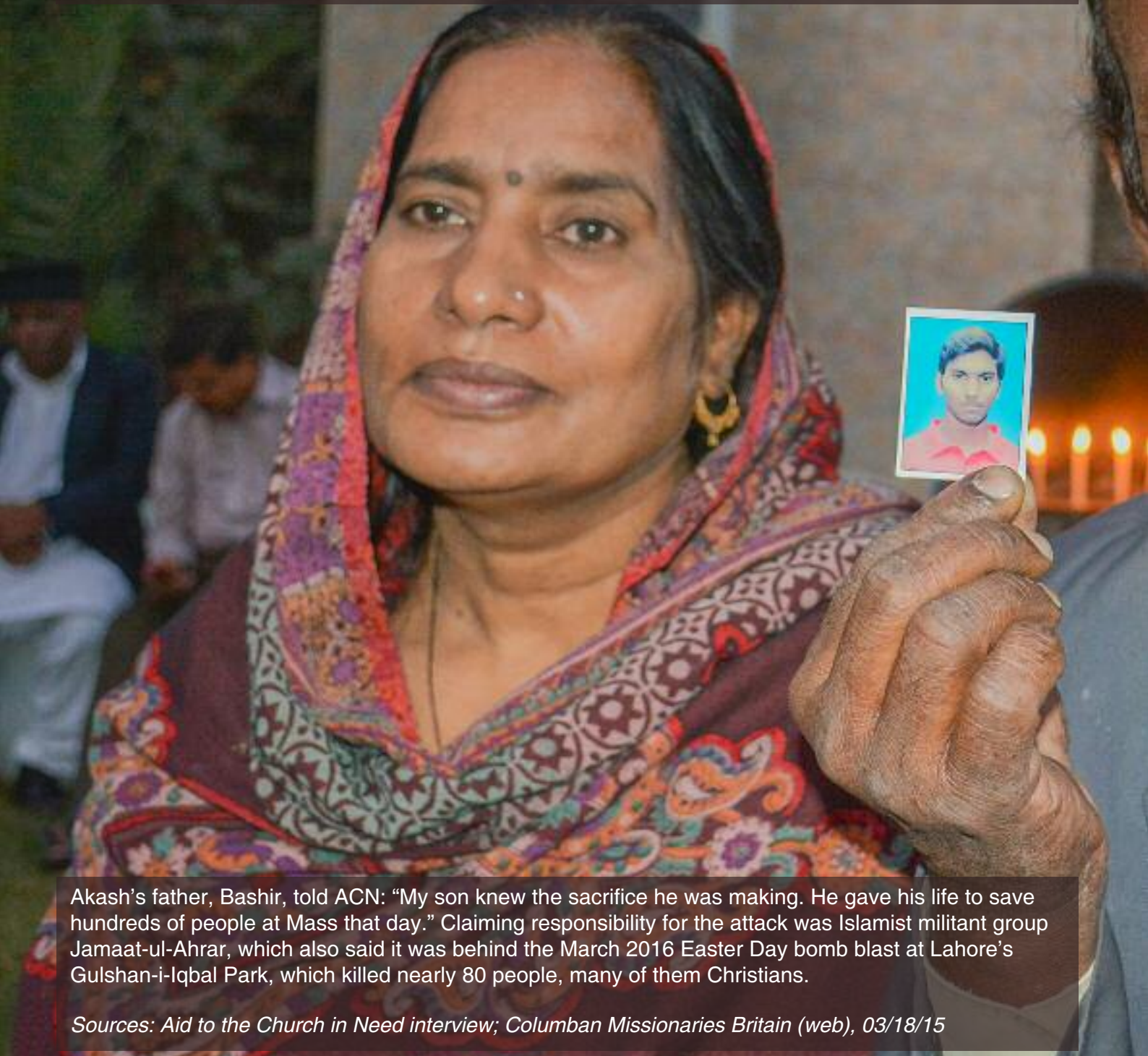
With Daesh in retreat, its fighters dispersed, Islamist extremism has inevitably spread further afield. **The attacks on Christians in the Philippines in the spring and summer of 2017** (*See case study on p. 23, ‘Philippines: Extremists smash and burn in cathedral attack’*) **give rise to speculation that countries in south-east Asia are now a new target for Daesh political take-over and insurgency**, raising major concerns for regional powers, not least Australia. In addition, the

“Failure by governments to take the necessary steps to stop genocide and bring the perpetrators to justice... represented a significant setback for suffering Christians.”

³² Nineveh Reconstruction Committee, 06/17/17 <<https://www.nrciraq.org/146-christian-families-return-to-qaraqosh/>>

Pakistan: He laid down his life for others

November 2015: The parents of a young man in Pakistan paid tribute to their son after he gave his life for hundreds of Mass-goers by preventing a suicide bomber from entering their parish church. Returning to St. John's Catholic Church, Yohannabad, near Lahore, where Akash Bashir died, his parents, Nazbano and Bashir, told Aid to the Church in Need staff visiting Pakistan how the 20-year-old volunteer guard was killed while slamming the church gate in the face of a suicide bomber. At least 15 people had been killed – and more than 70 injured – when on Sunday, March 15, 2015 suicide bombers struck at St John's and nearby Christ Church Protestant Church.



Akash's father, Bashir, told ACN: "My son knew the sacrifice he was making. He gave his life to save hundreds of people at Mass that day." Claiming responsibility for the attack was Islamist militant group Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, which also said it was behind the March 2016 Easter Day bomb blast at Lahore's Gulshan-i-Iqbal Park, which killed nearly 80 people, many of them Christians.

Sources: Aid to the Church in Need interview; Columban Missionaries Britain (web), 03/18/15



spate of Islamist attacks in 2016-17 on Western countries, including France, Germany, Belgium and the UK, clearly indicated that a specific campaign of destabilisation was underway. **If Daesh is, as the group claims, the mastermind behind these attacks, it is reasonable to suggest that their targeting of Christian communities in Syria and Iraq and elsewhere could yet be replicated in the West. Churches have reason for extra vigilance, especially if the militants prove able to identify and exploit weaknesses in Western intelligence and surveillance.**

Governments weak on extremism

Over the period under review, evidence emerged to show that the increasing threat to Christians from Islamist extremism did not just come from radical groups, but also from governments. In Pakistan, the pre-eminent problem for the Church came from banned fundamentalist cells. Many such groups have been banned by the government but its apparent failure to crackdown on them effectively compounded the problem of violence suffered by Christians and other minorities. On March 27, 2016, a faction of the Pakistan Taliban claimed responsibility for an attack in Lahore’s Gulshan-i-Iqbal Park which – taking place on Easter Day – was directed primarily against Christians, with as many as 24 of the faithful among the dead.³³ But, while decrying such attacks in the strongest terms, **the Pakistan Government came under mounting pressure amid indications that it was increasingly reluctant or unable to tackle head-on the apparent growth of intolerant Islam in society, and as a result was becoming part of the problem** (See case study opposite, ‘Pakistan: He laid down his life for others’). One frequently cited example was the lack of progress in the Asia Bibi case. The Christian mother of five had been on death row for alleged blasphemy against Islam. But when the Supreme Court investigated the case, progress was stalled when in October 2016 the judge unexpectedly “recused”³⁴ himself. It became

³³ Imran Gabol, “At least 72 killed in suicide blast as terror revisits Lahore,” Dawn, 03/28/16 <<http://www.dawn.com/news/1248259>>

³⁴ USCIRF Report 2017: Pakistan

“ Since the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power... Christians in India have faced increasing intolerance and violence. ”

increasingly apparent that it was impossible to open up discussion on the blasphemy laws, which at present carry maximum sentences of life imprisonment and execution. In the meantime, there was continuing criticism of the government for failing to revise core school curriculum texts which were perceived to incite hatred against Christians.³⁵

In countries such as Sudan, the Islamist threat was mainly from the government, which human rights observers accused of causing religious freedom to “spiral downwards”.³⁶ In the 2015-17 period, Sudan’s President Omar al-Bashir pursued a hard-line Islamist agenda, deeply hostile to Christians, resulting in “churches being torn down each month”³⁷ (*See case study on p. 25, ‘Sudan Churches destroyed on government orders’*), Christians being arrested for alleged proselytism and women being fined for wearing “obscene” immodest dress.³⁸ **When the government removed the citizenship rights of people with**

<<http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.2017.pdf>>

³⁵ A confidential report on school text books in Sindh and Punjab seen by Aid to the Church in Need

³⁶ Mark Pattison, “Commission Head: Religious Freedom has ‘Spiraled Downwards’”, *America*, 05/03/16 <<https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/global-religious-freedom-has-spiraled-downward>> referring to USCIRF’s chairman Robert George, Princeton University Law professor comments about religious freedom: “Regrettably, things have not improved, and in some places, things have gotten worse. At best, in most of the countries we covered, religious conditions have failed to improve in any demonstrable way. In most cases, they have spiraled downward”

³⁷ Oliver Maksan, “People are proud to be Christians”, Aid to the Church in Need report (06/30/17) – following an ACN project trip to Sudan

³⁸ Sudanese Penal Code 1991, <https://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1329_1202725629_sb106-sud-criminalact1991.pdf>

origins outside the country, it sparked a massive exodus of Christians, who were forced to go to their ancestral homelands in neighbouring South Sudan, in spite of having lived in Sudan itself for 30 years or more.³⁹

Evidence of the West fuelling extremism

The regime in Sudan came under increased international pressure to improve its human rights record. In January 2017, the US put in place a six-month waiver on sanctions against Sudan, permitting trade opportunities on the proviso that the regime took steps to stop violations against human rights and religious freedom.⁴⁰ The US policy to Sudan in this regard stood in stark contrast to its approach to Saudi Arabia. Western powers, including the US, came in for criticism for not only failing to tackle the causes of extremism, but actually fuelling it. In May 2017, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) criticized the US Government for failing to take action to pressure Saudi Arabia into preventing human rights violations, preferring to maximize the potential of its trading relationship with the country.⁴¹ That same month, US President Donald J Trump signed a \$110 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia on his first overseas trip in office. The deal had been held up under the previous administration of President Barack Obama “by human rights concerns”⁴². The deal came amid continuing reports – including Wikileaks files⁴³ – that sources within Saudi Arabia are supplying arms and finance to Sunni extremist groups, notably Daesh, guilty of genocide against Christians. The Saudi government has consistently

³⁹ ACN (UK) News, 02/11/16 <<http://www.acnmalta.org/2016/02/24/sudan-finding-the-strength-to-forgive-clare-creegan/>>

⁴⁰ USCIRF 2017 Report: Sudan <<http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Sudan.2017.pdf>>

⁴¹ “Although the State Department has designated Saudi Arabia as a CPC [Country of Particular Concern] repeatedly since 2004, most recently in October 2016, an indefinite waiver has been in place since 2006 on taking an otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the CPC designation.” USCIRF 2017 Report: Saudi Arabia, p.1 <<http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/SaudiArabia.2017.pdf>>

⁴² Steve Harman, “Centrepiece of Trump’s Second Day in Saudi Arabia: Address to 50 Leaders”, VOA News, 05/21/17 <<https://www.voanews.com/a/trump-trip-saudi-arabia-second-day-address-to-leaders/3863841.html>>

⁴³ Martin Williams, “FactCheck Q&A: Is Saudi Arabia funding ISIS?”, Channel 4 News (website), 06/07/16 citing evidence of Saudi financial links with Daesh contained in emails leaked from office of Hillary Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State 2009-13, 06/07/17 <<https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-qa-is-saudi-arabia-funding-isis>>

Philippines: Extremists smash and burn in cathedral attack

May 2017: Islamist extremists in the Philippines filmed themselves desecrating and setting fire to a cathedral, in an attack on a city which included the abduction of a priest and hundreds of others. Militants from Maute, an Islamist organisation which has pledged allegiance to Daesh (ISIS), desecrated sacred images at St. Mary's Cathedral, Marawi city in Mindanao island, and destroyed parts of the building.

In the 96-second video, the gun-toting militants – some of them teenagers – are seen destroying images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary and tearing up posters of Pope Francis.

The Islamists also desecrated a chapel in Malagakit village, also in Mindanao.

In the Maute attack on Marawi, Father Teresito 'Chito' Sukanob and parishioners were abducted.

At the time of writing, up to 100 of those kidnapped were still being held, including the priest.

Responding to the attack on his cathedral, Bishop Edwin de la Pena of Marawi, said: "Our faith has really been trampled on."

Sources: Catholic Herald, 06/06/17; World Watch Monitor, 06/27/17

denied the accusations, calling them "false allegations",⁴⁴ but sources close to Aid to the Church in Need, who asked to remain anonymous, have defended them and spoken out against the arms industry in the West: "The West is involved in selling [weaponry] to Saudi Arabia and they are supplying the weapons to Daesh."⁴⁵ Given that Islamist groups such as Daesh are likely to be heavily reliant on undeclared external sources for weapons and intelligence, there is an urgent need to step up action to stop all entities collaborating with them. Persecuted Christians are among the many who stand to be beneficiaries of progress in this area.

⁴⁴ *Guardian*, 06/19/14 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/19/saudi-arabia-rejects-iraqi-accusations-isis-support>>

⁴⁵ Aid to the Church in Need sources who insisted on anonymity for their personal safety



India: Christian minister beaten unconscious

February 2017: A Christian pastor in India was left in a coma after being beaten in a “planned” attack apparently carried out by Hindutva extremists. Several young men reportedly pounced on the Rev Gandham Padma Rao, 49, in Medipally village, Telangana state, close to where he ministers. Before slipping into unconsciousness, the pastor told police that the attack was religiously motivated. He stated: “They spoke to me in vulgar language: ‘You must never come to our village to pray. You should never enter our village.’” But local police misrepresented his complaint, removing all references to his attackers’ Hindutva identity, calling them drunken youths instead. Pastor Rao’s son, Samuel Mark, said the attack was “planned”: “My dad went to visit the families who had been attending our church over years now. He had no[thing] to do with the assailants.” He added: “He didn’t even respond to them when they shouted at him. All of a sudden, they began kicking him on the road.” The attack on the Rev. Rao comes after his church’s cross and sound equipment were destroyed in 2015.

Source: Morning Star News, 02/03/17



© Morning Star News

Religious nationalism and the targeting of Christians

Since the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in the April-May 2014 General Election, Christians in India have faced increasing intolerance and violence. The BJP’s espousal of Hindutva philosophy has been a crucial factor in this situation: Hindutva, a right-wing form of Hindu nationalism, sees India as a Hindu country which should not tolerate other religions or cultures. Much of the anti-Christian rhetoric of Hindutva groups hinges on the suggestion that Christians are responsible for forced conversions. Archbishop Leo Cornelio of Bhopal claimed that such allegations were designed to sow division between faith communities, adding: “I want to ask all those who

accuse us of converting gullible people to Christianity: ‘Where are those whom we converted?’”⁴⁶ Hindutva groups have held Ghar Wapsi (“home coming”) ceremonies – and reports suggest (ironically given their rhetoric against forced conversion) that many of these events have involved the forcible re-conversion of Christians to Hinduism.

A report by the Catholic Secular Forum recorded 365 serious anti-Christian atrocities in India in 2016, including 10 people being killed and more than 500 members of the clergy or senior community members being attacked for their faith. For example, in July 2016 a 14-year-old

⁴⁶ “New data disproves conversion allegations: Indian Christians,” UCA News, 08/26/15 <<http://www.ucanews.com/news/new-data-disproves-conversion-allegations-indian-christians/74150>>

Sudan: Churches destroyed on government orders

May 2017: Two churches in Sudan were destroyed on the orders of the regime – with another 25 also facing demolition. The levelling of the Sudanese Church of Christ (SCOC) building in the Algadisia district of the capital, Khartoum on May 17, 2017 came 10 days after the government demolished the SCOC church in Soba Al Aradi, the last Christian place of worship in the area. When the regime announced the list of demolitions of religious buildings which included mosques, the government stated that the churches were built in violation of designated land usage. An ACN source said: “The government has made it clear that no new churches will be allowed, whereas none of the mosques will face the same reality.”

Sources: USCRIF 2017 Report; Aid to the Church in Need interview





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China: Bishop repeatedly arrested and forced on “a trip”

June 2017: Catholics in China were praying for their new bishop, who – at the time of writing – was being held at an unknown location after the authorities prevented him from being installed. Peter Shao Zhumin, 54, had been appointed Coadjutor Bishop of Wenzhou, with automatic right of succession. But, when Bishop Vincent Zhu Weifang died in September 2016, authorities arrested Bishop Zhumin (*left*) and took him on “a trip”, releasing him a month later. Re-arrested briefly over Easter, Bishop Zhumin disappeared for a fourth time in May. A month later, a Catholic spotted him at an airport in Wenzhou but police minders escorted him away to an unknown location. As an “underground” Catholic Bishop, the prelate heads a community not recognized by the state. The Catholic Church in Wenzhou is split between the “official” government Church and the “underground” Church.

Sources: UCANews, 05/24/17; AsiaNews, 06/19/17

Christian schoolgirl in Chhattisgarh State was gang-raped and killed following her family's refusal to renounce their faith.⁴⁷ 2017 has seen a sharp rise in incidents, and **data available at time of writing this report (covering January to May 2017) showed that there were 316 incidents – almost as many as were recorded for the whole of 2016.**⁴⁸

Attacks are reported to have drastically increased since the BJP's landslide victory in the March 2017 elections – with the sharpest rises in incidents occurring in Uttar Pradesh and Telangana States⁴⁹ (*See case study on p. 24, 'India: Christian minister beaten unconscious'*). **Increasingly throughout the period, Christians in several villages were denied access to rice, wheat, sugar and other food offered at subsidized rates under the 2013 National Food Security Act.** In June 2017, Christians in a village in Uttar Pradesh were denied access to water for their crops after Hindus refused to sell water from their boreholes to four Christian families. Members of the families had been forced to take part in Hindu rituals and deny their faith; those who refused were beaten. It seems that active discrimination at local level has been empowered, if not actually encouraged, by the rise to power of Hindutva politicians.⁵⁰

Communism's worsening clampdown on Christianity

Christians in communist countries China and North Korea continue to experience persecution and discrimination in various forms. North Korea's 'Songbun' social stratification system determines access to necessities such as food, education and health care based on people's position in one of 51 potential categories, which signify greater or lesser

loyalty to the regime. Those in lower categories are classified as 'hostile' to the state (Protestants rank at 37, Catholics at 39). This system enshrines discrimination based on religious belief in the very structure of Communist society, making it all the more worrying that in 2016 China announced plans to implement a similar system. Citizens would be assigned a category based on their political, commercial, social and legal "credit". While details remain vague, it seems probable that the system would assign a lower rating to Christians. This would appear likely especially given that government efforts to increase control of the Church gained fresh impetus in April 2016 following a programmatic speech by President Xi Jinping at a national conference on the regime's approach to religion. **Part of the narrative presented by President Xi Jinping is that Christianity is a means of "foreign infiltration" into China.** Recognizing the influence of religious practice on society, he insisted on the need to "sinicize" religious life – i.e. make it authentically Chinese (for which one can read Communist) – and "automotize" it – i.e. free it from foreign control.⁵¹ This has been reflected in the government response to religious groups that operate outside of state control – the so-called "underground churches". There has been a renewed crackdown on Church leaders considered dissidents by the regime, notably Bishop Vincent Guo Xijin of Mindong⁵² and Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin (*See case study opposite, 'China: Bishop repeatedly arrested and forced on "a trip"'*). The perception that religion provides a means of foreign infiltration is also reflected in the rhetoric used by North Korea. The death of American student Otto Warmbier in June 2017, following his incarceration in North Korea's prison system, highlighted this. Throughout his trial, the official narrative of his crime stressed Christianity – even though Mr. Warmbier was Jewish. The state claimed he had removed the political banner from his hotel at the prompting of a friend from the Friendship United

⁴⁷ Matters India, 07/27/16 <<http://mattersindia.com/2016/07/christian-girl-gangraped-killed-for-not-giving-up-faith/>>

⁴⁸ Open Doors, 05/19/17 <www.opendoorsusa.org/take-action/pray/persecution-india-soars-ever-higher/>

⁴⁹ Release International News, 04/27/17 <<http://www.releaseinternational.org/alarmed-rise-in-attacks-as-hindu-nationalists-tighten-grip/>>

⁵⁰ Morning Star News, 06/26/17 <<http://morningstarnews.org/2017/06/christian-families-india-forced-hindu-ritual-denied-water/>>

⁵¹ Asian Correspondent, 04/25/16 <<https://asiancorrespondent.com/2016/04/chinese-president-xi-says-religious-groups-must-submit-to-communist-partys-control/#tceHXggvka2CzVWQ.97>>

⁵² Asia News, 06/06/17

Methodist Church. The discourse of Mr. Warmbier's crime was framed to reflect the view that Christianity is foreign. One former North Korean security agent told NGO Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that Christianity is "persecuted because basically, it is related to the United States...and is considered spying. Since Americans conveyed Christianity and since they are the ones who attempted to invade our country, those who are Christians are spies. Spies are executed."⁵³

Otto Warmbier's return to the US in a state of "unresponsive wakefulness" and subsequent death

also draws attention to the extreme conditions endured in North Korea's prison camps. **Reports describe Christians undergoing "unspeakable atrocities" in the camps – often being singled out for worse treatment because they are religious prisoners –** including forced labor, torture, persecution, starvation, rape, forced abortion, sexual violence and extra-judicial killing. According to CSW, Christians have also been hung on a cross over a fire, crushed under a steamroller and herded off bridges.⁵⁴ One estimate suggests that three-quarters of Christians in the camps die from the harsh punishments they receive.⁵⁵

China permits more freedom of religion than North Korea, and has not been as harsh in its punishments as its neighbor, but human rights have been seriously violated as the state strives to bring religious activities under ever-tighter

⁵³ *Total Denial: Violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea* (Christian Solidarity Worldwide, September 2016), pp. 6-7

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 16

⁵⁵ Christian Post, 11/11/16

control. The *Regulations on Religious Affairs*, which are scheduled to take effect at some point in 2017, will prohibit "organizing religious activities in unapproved religious sites" and "preaching, organizing religious activities, and establishing religious institutions or religious sites at schools".⁵⁶

Universities and other places of education in

particular have already seen a clampdown on religion, with Christmas parties, Christmas trees and greeting cards banned in various institutions.⁵⁷

Zhejiang province in particular has tried to repress Christianity.

The ongoing campaign of

removing crosses and destroying church property which began there has spread to neighbouring Henan and Anhui. Zhejiang's authorities have introduced further measures aimed at controlling religious communities, including installing video cameras to monitor their compounds. The outlook for Christians under communism remains bleak, and as the West continues to foster economic ties with China, fundamental human rights violations are seemingly overlooked in the quest for trade deals.⁵⁸

Conclusion – it's now or never to save Christians from persecution

In a message broadcast on BBC Radio 4, on Dec. 22, 2016, HRH The Prince of Wales referred to a recent meeting in London, at which Aid to the Church in Need arranged for him to meet witnesses of persecution of Christians and others in the Middle East and elsewhere. Prince Charles

⁵⁶ China Aid, 11/09/16

⁵⁷ Asia News, 01/14/16

⁵⁸ See for example *Telegraph*, 05/29/17 <www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2017/05/29/britain-will-pay-key-role-building-chinas-new-silk-road/>



Suffering for their faith: Women in Eritrea experience torture if they belong to Christian denominations not recognized by the state.

Eritrea: Imprisoned for their faith

June 2017: Up to 33 Christian women in Eritrea were jailed on an island prison notorious for the torture of inmates. The women, who were jailed at Nakura island prison off the Eritrean coast, were among more than 120 Christians arrested after being accused of taking part in prayer activities involving banned Church groups. The arrests, all carried out within a single month, were part of a government crackdown on so-called dissident activity.

Human rights organizations have frequently claimed there is maltreatment of prisoners at Nakura prison, with reports of inmates being tied up and their Bibles burned in front of them. Reporting back from a rare fact-finding visit to Eritrea, a source known to Aid to the Church in Need said there are “hundreds of political prisons” in Eritrea, where many Christians are being held.

“Prisoners cry out to be dead,” said the source, “and go crazy because of the torture they receive. The oppression of the regime against [non-registered] Christians is merciless.”

Sources: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 06/28/17; John Pontifex, “Escape from a prison state”, The Tablet, 05/20/17, pp. 11–12.

reflected: “Clearly, for such people, religious freedom is a daily, stark choice between life and death. The scale of religious persecution is not widely appreciated.”⁵⁹

At a time in the West when there is increasing media focus on the rights of people regardless of gender, ethnicity or sexuality – to name but a few – it is ironic that in many sections of the media there should be such limited coverage of the massive persecution experienced by so many Christians. The worsening plight of Christians in a country such as Eritrea – little known to the West and hitherto largely ignored by the media – is a case in point (*See case study on p. 29, ‘Eritrea: Imprisoned for their faith’*). Highlighting the scale of Christian oppression against a background of media ambivalence towards the subject forms the impetus behind this, the 2017 edition of ACN’s *Persecuted and Forgotten?* report. It shows that **not only is Christianity still the world’s most oppressed faith community but also that in many cases genocide and other crimes against humanity now mean that the Church in core countries and regions faces the possibility of imminent wipe-out.** As plurality gives way to a monoculture, not just in the Middle East but in parts of the Indian subcontinent and Africa, the threatened demise of the Church there can no longer be seen as of concern only for Christians, or indeed other people of faith, but for all those who care about diversity and tolerance. In this sense,

⁵⁹ “Prince Charles warns against religious persecution”, BBC News, 12/22/16
<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-38401857>>

the survival of Christianity can be seen as the test case *par excellence* for the very survival of plurality in these core countries. In India, the Church’s survival may not be at stake, but a sudden surge of violence in the period under review shows that this question of plurality has specific relevance. Elsewhere around the globe, notably China, a renewed government clampdown means the Church is increasingly being forced to choose between subjugation – the severe infringement of rights that guarantee the faithful’s identity – or the status of illegal outcasts, entirely at the mercy of the regime’s surveillance and security system. **The pervasive nature of persecution – and evidence implicating regimes with whom the West has close trading and strategic links – mean that it behoves our governments to use their influence to stand up for minorities, especially Christians. No longer should Christians be sacrificed on the altar of strategic expediency and economic advantage.** For organizations such as Aid to the Church in Need, this *Persecuted and Forgotten?* report is a call to action, highlighting the urgency of pastoral and emergency relief. In many cases, this help is all the more vital, given the evident failure of government and UN aid to get through to Christians.

By witnessing to the suffering of Christians, this report shines a light on persecution and signals to people of conscience that the faithful’s plight should never be forgotten.

“ In Iraq, the exodus of Christians has continued to be very severe, but hope is on the horizon with communities returning to their homes. ”

Image shows an Iraqi refugee in Turkey



Map of oppression/persecution of Christians, highlighting countries selected for inclusion in the 2015–17 report.

KEY

Nature of persecution/oppression

- = Extreme
- = High to Extreme
- = High
- = Moderate to High



= Situation worsened



= Situation unchanged



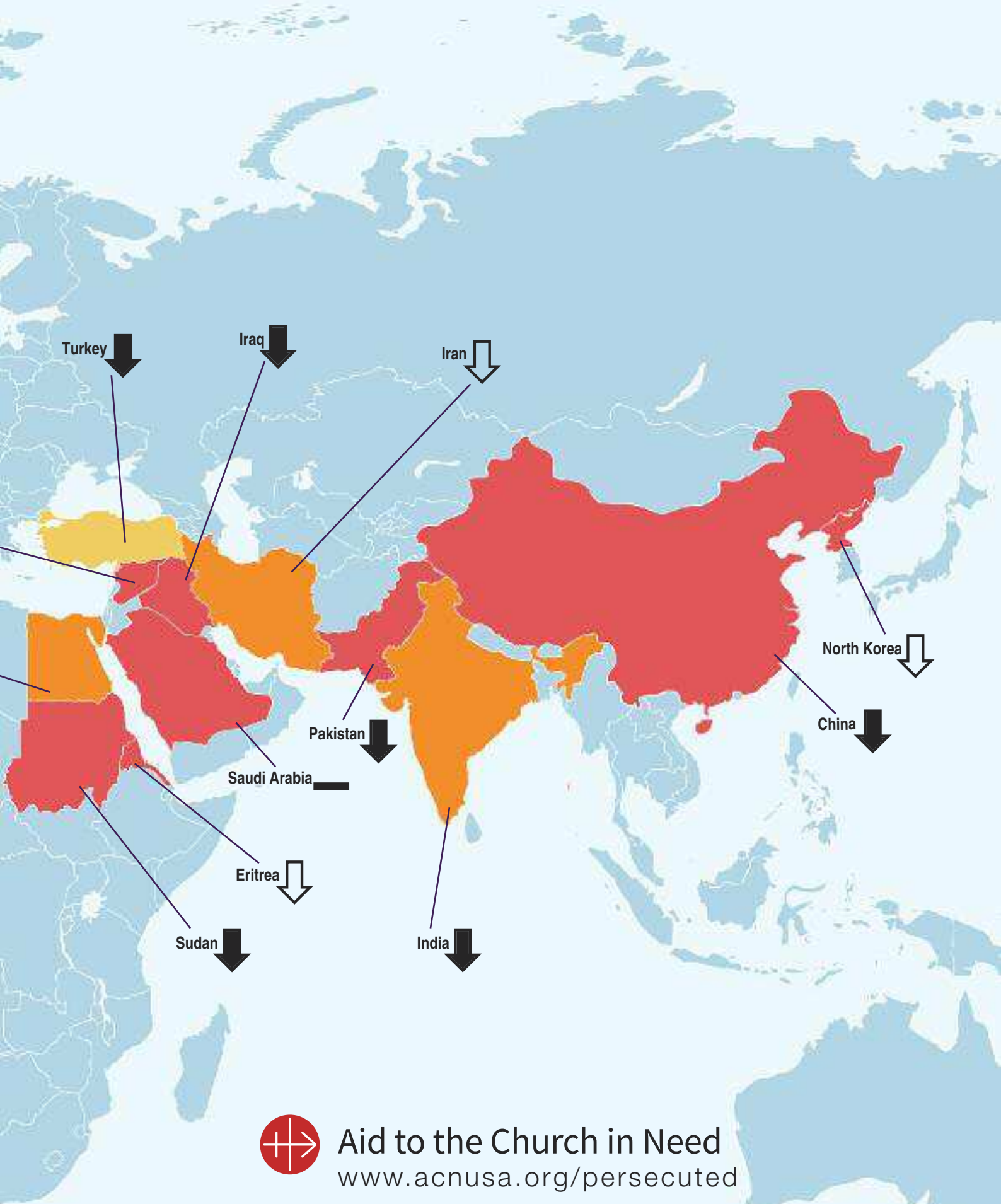
= Situation improved

Where arrows are depicted in outline it means the countries have only got slightly better or slightly worse.

Syria

Egypt






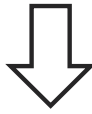


















Nigeria











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Scale of persecution/oppression of Christians

This table provides a comparison of the 13 countries assessed in both the 2013–15 and 2015–17 reports.

Country	Scale of persecution/oppression	2015–17 compared to 2013–15	Key indicators	Scale of persecution/oppression	2013–15 compared to 2011–13
China			New regulations led to more churches destroyed and crosses pulled down. Threat of more restrictive legislation. Surveillance has grown. House Churches under increased pressure to conform or disband.		
Egypt			More than 100 killed in three major attacks and ongoing instances of individual Christians being killed by extremists.		
Eritrea			Increased government clampdown on Christians, imprisoning those who oppose its increasing control of religious groups. Continuing exodus due to hardships endured by all communities.		
India			Christians have faced a rising wave of violence, with attacks drastically increasing since the March 2017 elections. 316 incidents were reported in the first five months of 2017.		
Iran			Escalation in anti-Christian sentiment in media outlets and proliferation of anti-Christian publications. Church experiences land confiscations, visa refusals, targeted surveillance and intimidation tactics.		
Iraq			Daesh tried to eliminate Christianity in areas under their control, including by destroying churches and forced conversion. Central government legislation prompted fears Christian children could be forced to renounce faith.		

In assessing the scale of oppression and persecution of Christians, ACN has considered many factors and drawn on a number of sources to make its final assessment. However, it should be noted that this sort of assessment is difficult to make for several reasons: i) acts of oppression and persecution are of different types, e.g. state suppression is different to acts of physical violence; ii) such conditions are frequently not uniform across a country or state; iii) the difficulties of getting information from some states or regions within countries;

KEY	 = Extreme	 = Situation worsened  = Situation unchanged  = Situation improved	Where arrows are depicted in outline it means the countries have only got slightly better or slightly worse.
	 = High to Extreme		
	 = High		
	 = Moderate to High		
	 = Moderate		

Country	Scale of persecution/ oppression	2015–17 compared to 2013–15	Key indicators	Scale of persecution/ oppression	2013–15 compared to 2011–13
Nigeria			Rising Fulani attacks have seen Christian villages devastated and many killed. Church reports indicate local government and military collusion in the murder of Christians as well as supplying funding and weapons.		
North Korea			Christians convicted are routinely sent to political internment camps where they experienced extra-judicial killing, torture, starvation, forced abortion and sexual violence.		
Pakistan			Rife discrimination is increasing against Christians - evident in the schools including their textbooks, the workplace where many Christians have menial jobs, and legal treatment.		
Saudi Arabia			Christianity is not legal in Saudi Arabia. State claims tolerance of private worship by non-Muslims – but death penalty for Christian converts from Islam.		
Sudan			Sudan's persecution against Christians has increased - with planning laws used as a pretext to destroy churches and Christian-owned buildings in an attempt to crush Christianity.		
Syria			Horrific accounts of genocidal atrocities by Daesh during this period have emerged. A disproportionately high number of Christians fled Syria - up to half the Christian population.		
Turkey			Large numbers of Church properties were seized by the state. Indications of continuing intolerance seen in Islamification of historic Christian sites, e.g. Hagia Sophia.		

iv) the essentially qualitative nature of ACN's own assessment, by its very nature, does not provide statistics that allow comparative analysis against readily measurable criteria. In making this assessment it has drawn on quantitative analyses such as the Pew Forum's *Social Hostilities Index* and Open Door's *World Watch List*, although taking into account that these are based on different periods. Ultimately there is necessarily a subjective element in a qualitative analysis of this kind.

Aid to the Church in Need supports Christians wherever they are persecuted, oppressed or in pastoral need. Every year the charity responds to more than 5,000 requests for aid from bishops and religious superiors in around 140 countries, including: training seminarians; printing Bibles and religious literature – including ACN’s Child’s Bible; supporting priests and religious in difficult circumstances; building and restoring churches and chapels; broadcasting religious programs; and helping refugees.



Aid to the Church in Need is a papal agency serving the pastoral and humanitarian needs of the persecuted and suffering Church.

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