

This Easter, billions of Christians around the world will celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but too many believers are prevented from freely worshipping and are targets of their own governments and fellow citizens. A new study reveals the world's worst persecutors of Christians and why we should care.

by Doug Bandow

The average American could be forgiven for not realizing that Christians are widely persecuted around the world. Jews, of course, have suffered the most brutal treatment imaginable for centuries, ranging from the Spanish Inquisition to Russian pogroms to the Nazi Holocaust. Buddhists, Hindus, Baha'is and Muslims all are mistreated in various countries. But more Christians are persecuted in more nations.

Although Christians are no longer tossed to the lions in the Roman Colosseum, believers are routinely murdered, imprisoned, tortured and beaten. Churches, businesses and homes are regularly destroyed. The opportunity to meet for worship and prayer is blocked. There is real persecution rather than the cultural hostility often denounced as "persecution" in America.

One of the leading groups working on behalf of the persecuted church is International Christian Concern (ICC,

Persecution.org). ICC publishes an annual Hall of Shame, through which it targets "the top 10 countries that have executed the most severe brutality toward Christians." Obviously, there is no objective standard for grading nations based on religious repression. Egypt, Iraq, the Maldives and Uzbekistan missed out on being named to the Hall of Shame this year but remain vicious persecutors.

Moreover, the direction a nation is moving matters. China and Vietnam are in the Hall of Shame, but, notes ICC, "although persecution is prevalent, it has declined significantly over the years, and ICC anticipates that this decrease will gradually continue." Still, the prospect of a freer future is of little solace to Christians in these countries who are persecuted today.

The most vicious persecutors typically are majority Muslim states or nations with a communist political heritage. But they are not alone. ICC's rogues' gallery is broad in scope.

**WHOEVER
LOSES HIS
LIFE FOR MY
SAKE ...**

The bodies of victims of religious attacks fill a mass grave in the Dogo Nahawa village in central Nigeria. On March 7, Muslim herders slaughtered more than 500 Christians, including women and children, in an early-morning attack. The attackers went after the Christians with machetes and burned down their homes and churches. (Reuters/Alaminou Abinloye)

CHINA

The world's most populous nation has a growing number of Christians, now estimated at around 100 million. Unfortunately, notes ICC, "the governing Chinese Communist Party (CCP) retains some elements of Leninist-Maoist hostility and fear toward religion. Chinese Christians, wary of state-controlled religious organs, turn to the model of 'house churches,' which have helped spark a once unthinkable revival."

The intensity of persecution varies by province. Overall, reports ICC, "2009 witnessed a continuation of prior practices for religious persecution in China. As seen in the past, the Chinese government continues to conduct periodic raids on house churches and other Christian events, oftentimes arresting believers and confining them to 'reeducation through labor' camps without a court hearing." The government also appears to be increasingly targeting human rights (and Christian) attorneys who defend Christians in court.

ERITREA

The problem in this impoverished state located on the Horn of Africa is more political authoritarianism than Islamic extremism, though Islam is the dominant faith by a bare majority. No one is free. In 2002, notes ICC, Eritrea outlawed by decree all but a few established churches. "All religious organizations, including several evangelical churches, were forced underground," reports ICC, "and many of their members were arrested."

Those who attend house fellowships face arrest, torture and prison. More than 3,000 Christians currently are jailed. Adds ICC, many "are kept in metal shipping containers, military barracks and prisons cells under inhumane conditions. Many Christians have been paralyzed or killed in prison due to torture and lack of medical attention." Believers also "have remained imprisoned for years without ever having been convicted for any crime."

ICC figures that the number of Christians at risk could run to about 2.8 million. Moreover, the intensity of

persecution has been increasing. No one, irrespective of his age, sex or health, is immune from abuse.

INDIA

The world's largest democracy has a large Hindu majority, with significant Muslim, Sikh and Christian minorities. Although the national government, especially under the Congress Party, does not persecute, violence is common—there were an average of three attacks a week on Christians, who number 24 million, last year.

The worst violence occurred in the state of Orissa in 2008 but, notes ICC, "Christians continue to face challenges. Many churches were destroyed, and others remain closed, making it difficult for Christians to worship in public. The Hindus suspected of the Orissa attacks have been exonerated by courts due to lack of evidence and police negligence to properly investigate suspects." Many Orissa Christians, threatened by Hindu radicals if they don't convert, remain in



refugee camps.

Several other Indian states similarly offer little protection from attack for Christians and do little to investigate and punish crimes against religious minorities. Adds ICC, "Christians also face discrimination from state and local officials. The states of Gujarat, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh enforce anti-conversion laws which restrict the freedom of Hindus to convert to other religions." Christians would be at even greater risk if the Bharatiya Janata Party, dominated by Hindu nationalists, regained power in New Delhi.

IRAN 

The government here is both Islamic and authoritarian. Persecution of Christians rose in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, leading to executions of church leaders in the 1990s. Last year, reports ICC, "Iran again witnessed extreme tactics of imprisonment, torture and rape used by the Iranian government in acts to terrorize and reduce the number of Christians within its borders."

Nevertheless, the number of Christians is thought to be rising, even though apostasy can result in imprisonment and death. In response, the Ahmadinejad government cracked down on Christians before the fraudulent June election last year. According to ICC, "The Iranian government has been active in obstructing television signals by erecting jamming towers in major cities, controlling phone lines to Christian television programs and arresting house church leaders." Estimates of the number of Christians facing persecution run from 300,000 (the official number) to 2 million (many converts are thought to attempt to hide their faith).

NIGERIA 

The second African nation to make the ICC's Hall of Shame has a slim Muslim majority. Although the national government does not persecute, it does little to limit abuses by the dozen northern states with Muslim majorities.

Explains ICC: "Since the introduction of Sharia law in 12 northern Nigerian states nearly a decade ago, Christian minorities living in the North have endured violence at the hands of Muslim mobs and Islamic militants. The suffering of Christian minorities is compounded

by the discriminatory policies of Muslim officials in the North and their failure to protect Christians from persecution." State governments ignore crimes against Christians, restrict Christian places of worship and discriminate against Christians in education and employment.

Some 75 million Christians are potentially at risk. Reports ICC: "This year, Christians faced horrific attacks waged by the Islamic extremist group, Boko Haram. These terrorists waged jihad against Christians and government officials. Several innocent civilians were killed, including three pastors who

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were murdered for refusing to convert to Islam. Boko Haram also destroyed more than 20 churches." The group even demands the imposition of Sharia law over the whole of Nigeria, including its primarily Christian states.

NORTH KOREA 

It is no surprise that the most hideous and vicious government on earth—which is saying a lot, given the competition—persecutes religious believers. ICC explains quite simply: "Religious freedom and human rights are non-existent."

No one knows how many Christians live in the North. There were 300,000 before the start of the Korean War. One estimate—only a wild guess—is that 30,000 Christians privately practice their faith today. "Official" churches exist in Pyongyang, but, warns ICC, "are actually no more than showcase structures for visiting dignitaries and NGO's."

While proclaiming the near godlike status of Dear Leader Kim Jong Il, the regime fears even the apparently minuscule Christian population. "In 2009, the North Korean government took new steps to combat religious activity and halted cross-border support from Chinese Christians," ICC reveals. "The government set up false prayer meetings and infiltrated underground churches as new tactics to entrap Christian converts.

The government is also known to frequently search suspected locations of Christian gatherings and to regularly seek out and dispose of underground believers in an effort to completely annihilate all Christians within its borders."

PAKISTAN 

Even if this nation, with the world's second-largest Muslim population, had not become the favored location for jihadists and terrorists, it would not be a hospitable land for Christians. Religious minorities long have labored under severe legal disabilities. "Pakistani laws,

most notably the blasphemy laws," says ICC, "serve to instigate attacks against Christians and others in the country." Blaspheming the prophet Mohammad, which in practice means telling the truth about his life and "ministry," can land one in prison or result in execution.

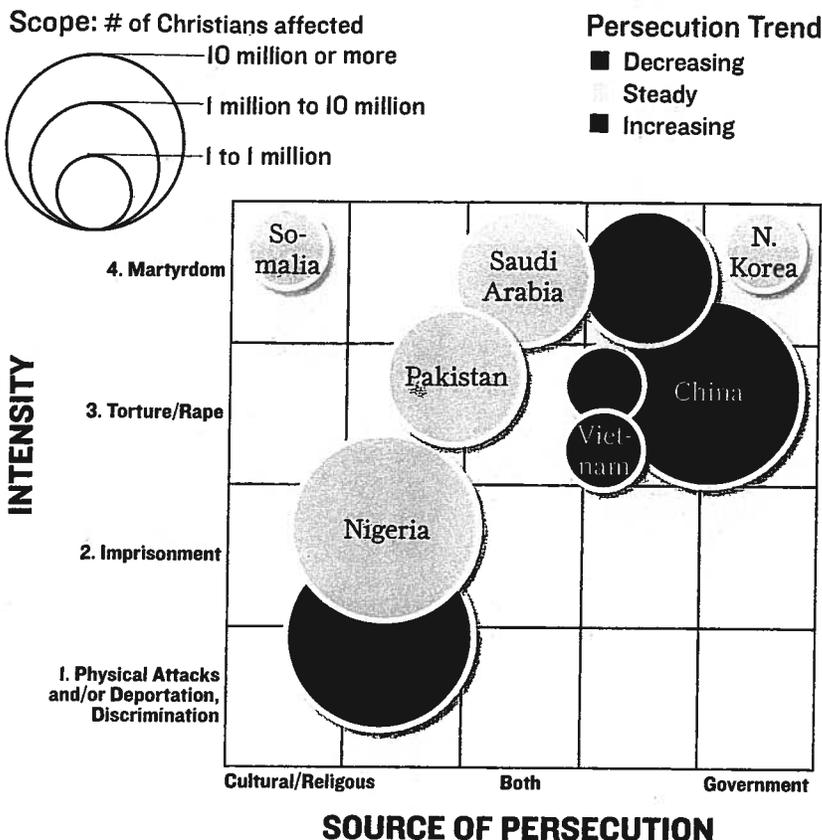
The legal vulnerability of Christians encourages private discrimination and violence. ICC reports, "A lack of equality in law enforcement creates an environment where Muslims feel free to use these laws to entangle religious minorities in hopeless legal battles for their own personal gain." Even worse is mob violence, which has become increasingly common, with the widespread destruction of churches and homes. One story the ICC relates tells of the horrific burning of a family of seven in their own home in the village of Gojra.

Unfortunately, despite Islamabad's supposed role as an American ally in the War on Terror, persecution is growing worse. "In keeping with the gradual ascension of Islamic insurgency," ICC warns, "sectarian violence targeting Christians and overall persecution is also rising dramatically." Anywhere between 2.6 million and 8.8 million Christians (estimates vary widely) are at risk.

SAUDI ARABIA 

This Islamic state is essentially totalitarian, barring political dissent and religious

Hall of Shame 2009



Source: "Hall of Shame Report for Year 2009," International Christian Concern

inhumane punishments on individuals that they consider to be offenders of its interpretation of Islam. Such punishments include flogging, hand amputations and execution by stoning. In 2009, the group killed more than a dozen Christians in a country where very few Christians exist or openly practice their faith."

The Christian population is estimated to run from 6,000 to 9,000. But no one really knows since most Christians are Muslim converts, which makes their faith a veritable death sentence if they are discovered.

VIETNAM

Vietnamese Christians number some 6.2 million, most of them Catholics. Although persecution is decreasing, mistreatment of Christians remains common. "Vietnam is a one-party Communist state that severely restricts and monitors all Christian activity," ICC writes. "Christianity is regarded as a western religion and is viewed as a threat to Communist authorities."

The intensity of persecution varies by region, with hundreds of Christians imprisoned in harsh conditions. Most at risk are politically suspect ethnic minorities, according to ICC. "Hmong and Montagnard Christians continue to be doubly persecuted as both an ethnic and religious minority. By refusing to join the officially sanctioned Church, they face beatings and imprisonment, and have come to be defined historically as exploited and oppressed peoples."

Vietnam's increasing integration in the world economy is likely to strengthen pressure on Hanoi to relax religious restrictions. Today, however, the country remains among the world's worst persecutors.

Americans take their freedom to worship for granted. Alas, millions of people around the world lack religious liberty.

We must not forget believers around the world who suffer for seeking to exercise their most basic human right to worship God. •

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freedom. In early February, the Mutaween, Saudi Arabia's infamous religious police that enforces religious purity, launched a crackdown on Valentine's Day, since it is named after a Christian martyr and saint, and confiscated all red items.

Unfortunately, the government, which enforces extreme Wahhabi doctrines, does far more to prevent the mostly foreign 1.2 million Christians from practicing their faith. "The government denies recognition or protection of any religion other than Sunni Islam," explains ICC. "Not one public church building exists in the country as Christians are forced to worship underground. Suspected converts to Christianity often become victims of honor killings." Convicted apostates face execution.

ICC also argues that "Saudi political and funding organizations are as dangerous a part of radical Islam as violent terrorism. These groups have a common goal: the global spread of radical Islam," and

thus, Christians in other nations also are in effect victims of Saudi religious persecution: "It is difficult to estimate the number of Christians who have been imprisoned, tortured or killed as a direct result of Saudi influence."

SOMALIA

This nation has lacked an effective government for two decades. Foreign countries primarily worry about piracy, but residents of Somalia suffer through the violence created by conflict among warlords, the internationally recognized but ineffective Transitional Federal Government of Somalia and the Islamic Al-Shabaab militia.

Christians suffer like everyone else from the violence. But Christians are a special target of Al-Shabaab, which advances a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. ICC explains: "Al-Shabaab's objective is the complete eradication of Christians from Somalia. It carries out cruel and