

North Korea Again Tops List of World's Worst Persecutors of Christians

✖ North Korea is again the world's worst persecutor of Christians, according to a new ranking released today by religious liberty advocates Open Doors.

The communist nation has topped the missions organization's World Watch List for eight consecutive years because of its long history of targeting Christians for arrest, torture and murder. California-based Open Doors estimates that of the 200,000 North Koreans languishing in political prisons, 40,000 to 60,000 of them are Christians.

"It is certainly not a shock that North Korea is No. 1 on the list of countries where Christians face the worst persecution," said Open Doors USA President Carl Moeller. "There is no other country in the world where Christians are persecuted in such a horrible and systematic manner. Three generations of a family are often thrown into prison when one member is incarcerated."

Although Iran has repeatedly surfaced in Open Doors' Top 10, the nation rose from No. 3 to No. 2 on this year's list because of a recent wave of arrests of Christians that began in 2008 and grew stronger in 2009. The

ministry estimates that at least 85 Christians were arrested last year, including two sisters who became the focus of an advocacy campaign by Open Doors and other Christian ministries.

“Iran jumping to No. 2 is noteworthy,” Moeller said. “Iranian Muslim background believers Maryam Rustampoor and Marzieh Amirizadeh were arrested simply for being Christians and refusing to recant their faith in Jesus Christ. They were released almost two months ago, helped by an advocacy campaign by Open Doors and other Christian organizations. But these two brave women along with hundreds of other believers still remain at risk inside Iran.”

Saudi Arabia remains at No. 3, though Open Doors said it received no reports of Christians being killed or physically harmed for their faith, and only one report of a Christian arrested was noted.

Somalia moved from No. 5, to the No. 4 spot after its Parliament in April voted unanimously to institute Islamic law. Open Doors leaders said the ministry also received reports of Christians being killed and arrested.

Rounding out the top 10 are Maldives, Afghanistan, Yemen, Mauritania, Laos and Uzbekistan, respectively. Yemen’s position at No. 7 was unchanged over last year. But concern about Islamic fundamentalism in the

nation has grown since U.S. officials discovered that al-Qaida leaders in Yemen planned a failed attempt to bomb a plane en route to Detroit on Christmas Day.

Open Doors reports that the Yemeni Constitution guarantees religious freedom but has declared Islam to be the state religion and Sharia law the source of its legislation. Although expatriates can practice religions other than Islam, Open Doors said Yemeni citizens who convert from Islam could face the death penalty.

Even with the limited religious liberty, nine expatriate Christian health workers were kidnapped by armed men last June. A few days later the bodies of three of them were found, and the fate of the remaining six remains unknown.

While most of the worst offenders in the World Watch List ranked in the Top 10 last year, there were notable exceptions. Mauritania moved up 10 positions from No. 18 last year to No. 8 this year. Open Doors attributed the jump to the assassination of Christian aid worker Christopher Leggett in June, the arrest and torture of 35 Mauritanian Christians in July and the arrest of a group of 150 of sub-Saharan Christians in August.

And though the situation for Christians is still severe there, Eritrea fell from No. 9 last year to No. 11 this year. Open Doors also recorded fewer

incidents
of Christian persecution in Algeria,
India, Cuba, Jordan, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, which made the
biggest improvement,
dropping from No. 41 to No. 48.

The change
in rankings is not necessarily a sign of improved religious
liberty, however. "There
was definitely an intensifying of persecution of Christians in
quite a few
countries this year, which I think outweighed the improvements
in other
countries," said Lindsay Vessey, advocacy director for Open
Doors, pointing to
the increased arrests and murders in Iran, Somalia and
Mauritania.

"Those types of huge number of arrest and restrictions on
religious freedom, I think, outweigh the rather small
improvements in the
countries we reported on, such as the improvements of India or
Cuba," she
added.

Despite the persecution, Vessey noted that churches continue
to grow in the world's most restrictive nations.

"North Korea has been on the top of our World Watch List as
the very worst persecutor of Christians for the past eight
years in a row,"
Vessey said. "The situation there is very dark. There really
is no religious
freedom whatsoever. If people are caught, they are put in
prison or executed.
And we've been receiving reports very regularly the past
several years and
continuing on into this year that the church is very vibrant,

the underground church, and it's growing."

"I think that's really encouraging," she added. "Just the testimony that even that when there is persecution, that's what God uses to grow His church."

Open Doors develops its World Watch List by sending its workers, church leaders and recognized experts in 70 countries a 53-question survey. The questionnaire examines such issues as the degree of legal restriction, state attitudes toward religious freedom, the liberty churches have to organize themselves, and incidents of anti-Christian violence.

Open Doors works in 46 of the 50 nations included in its World Watch List.