

The World's Worst Persecutors

North Korea again topped Open Doors' list of the world's 50 worst persecutors of Christians.



Photo: Compass Direct

Feb. 04, 2009 –The world has become a more dangerous place for Christians.

So says Carl Moeller, president of Open Doors USA, which Tuesday released its annual World Watch List naming the 50 countries that are the worst persecutors of Christians.

Topping the list for the seventh consecutive year is North Korea, an isolated, communist nation that has a long history of religious repression and human rights abuse. But Moeller said he was surprised to see a surge in anti-Christian violence in nations that had been considered relatively stable, such as India and Algeria.

“Militant religious fundamentalism worldwide is the biggest problem facing Christians today,” said Moeller, whose Southern California-based organization advocates for the persecuted church.

“Twenty [or] 30 years ago the ... atheistic philosophies of communism dominated the discussions of Christian persecution. Today the challenge is not to defend the existence of God and Christianity and our right to worship Him, but it's the challenge of Islam and other fundamentalist perspectives that challenge us on who is God. And that challenge is one that the Christian church is answering, but it's answering it in the face of great opposition and great persecution in many places.”

India rose from No. 30 to No. 22 on the World Watch List after Hindu militants torched churches and attacked Christian villages, killing more than 100 people and leaving thousands homeless.

In Algeria, which rose from 31 to 19 on the list, government officials in the predominantly Muslim nations have been closing churches and arresting Christians, sometimes for simply carrying a Bible, Moeller said.

In Iraq, which rose from 21 to 16, churches were bombed, and several Christians were kidnapped and/or murdered in a series of attacks in Mosul last year. And in northern Nigeria, clashes between Christians and Muslims led to more than 100 deaths and the destruction of several churches.

“So many of our liberties here in the United States and throughout the West are under threat ... as they are in many of these countries around the world,” Moeller said. “These lists serve to warn us, to cause us to watch what is happening and to determine from those signs the course of action we should take as a church.”

In North Korea, Christians are routinely tortured, imprisoned and even murdered for resisting Kim Jong Il’s communist ideology. Suzanne Scholte, chairman of the North Korea Freedom Coalition, said Kim Jong Il’s regime fears losing its ability to control access to the outside world. More and more, outsiders are using radios and balloons to send messages into the isolated nation.

“In order for them to keep people under control, they have to keep the people in the dark-spiritually and literally,” said Scholte. “There will be a crackdown because of Kim Jong Il’s fears about people knowing about what’s going on in the outside world.”

Despite reports of the dictator’s declining health, Scholte believes the persecution will continue. “Christians are always

going to be on the front lines of persecution in North Korea because they are the ones to believe that Kim Jong Il is not god,” said Scholte, who was awarded the Seoul Peace Prize last year for her work assisting North Korean defectors.

Open Doors compiled its World Watch List based on responses to a questionnaire sent to missionaries and indigenous church leaders around the world.

Ranking second and third, respectively, were Saudi Arabia, where a young girl was killed by a religious police officer for writing about her faith online, and Iran, where a major crackdown on house churches led to dozens of arrests.

Afghanistan moved up three spots to No. 4 as a result of increased pressure on religious minorities from Taliban militants. Somalia and the Maldives ranked fifth and sixth, respectively, with Yemen at No. 7, Laos at No. 8, Eritrea at No. 9 and Uzbekistan at 10.

Although they are still repressive of Christianity, Bhutan and China dropped out of the top 10 and ranked at No. 11 and 12, respectively. Last year, Bhutan was fifth and China was 10th on the list. **(Read the entire list.)**

Moeller said he was encouraged that Vietnam fell from No. 17 last year to No. 23, a sign that fewer believers are being harassed. Open Doors also recorded fewer reports of persecution in Colombia, causing the longtime violator to fall completely off the list.

Moeller urges Christians in the West to pray for the world’s persecuted church, particularly those in North Korea. For the last three years, Open Doors has been leading a 24/7 prayer effort for the nation that will culminate with North Korea Freedom Week April 25-May 2.

Although she encourages advocacy, including sending letters of

support to North Koreans, Scholte agrees that spiritual warfare is the most effective action Christians can take.

“Ultimately what we’re facing in North Korea is spiritual warfare,” she said. “We’re attacking a stronghold-really, a principality over that nation. When we say words like ‘North Korea freedom’ and ‘North Korea human rights,’ we are directly attacking that principality. Where do freedom and human rights come from? They come from God.”