

Compass Direct News' Top 10 Stories of 2010

Pakistan's blasphemy laws led to the murder of two Christians and a death penalty sentence for a Christian mother of five in 2010, topping Compass' top 10 news stories. Following this blend of state and societal violence to Christians was a spike in attacks on Christians in Iraq; a possible death penalty for an Afghan Christian accused of apostasy; a 17-year-old Somali girl's martyrdom; and large-scale attacks on Christians in Nigeria. The complete list follows:

1. Pakistan's Blasphemy Law Leads to Murder, Death Penalty for the Innocent

Pakistan's widely condemned blasphemy laws led to the murder of two men and a death penalty sentence for a mother of five in 2010. On July 19 in Faisalabad, Pakistan, a suspected Islamic extremist shot dead two Christians accused of blasphemy. An armed gunman shot the Rev. Rashid Emmanuel, 32, and his 30-year-old brother Sajid Emmanuel after handwriting experts on July 14 notified police that signatures on papers denigrating Muhammad did not match those of the accused. Expected to be exonerated, the two leaders of United Ministries Pakistan were being led in handcuffs back to jail when they were shot. Advocacy group representatives said the two bodies bore cuts and other signs of having been tortured while the brothers were in police custody.

Muslims had staged large demonstrations calling for the death penalty for the brothers, who were arrested when Rashid Emmanuel agreed to meet a mysterious caller at a train station but was instead surrounded by police carrying papers denigrating Muhammad – supposedly signed by the pastor and his brother and bearing their telephone numbers. The Muslim who allegedly placed the anonymous call to the pastor, Muhammad Khurram Shehzad, also filed blasphemy charges against the

brothers, said Atif Jamil Pagaan, coordinator of the Harmony Foundation advocacy group. Khurram Shehzad had filed the blasphemy case on July 1 under Section 295-C of Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which are commonly abused to settle personal scores. Section 295-C states that "whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) shall be punishable with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall be liable to fine." The shooter (or shooters) escaped.

The first woman to be sentenced to die in Pakistan for allegedly blaspheming Islam's prophet said she was shaken and aghast that she was never asked for a statement in her defense. In an interview with Compass at Sheikhpura District Jail, Asia Noreen (alternatively spelled Aaysa, and also called Asia Bibi) said through tears and a shaking voice that she was heartbroken and shattered. The mother of two children and step-mother to three others asked a question that no one has been able to answer for her. "How can an innocent person be accused, have a case in court after a false FIR [First Information Report], and then be given the death sentence, without even once taking into consideration what he or she has to say?"

Arrested on June 19, 2009, Noreen was accused of blaspheming Muhammad and defaming Islam. A judge under pressure from area Islamists convicted her under Pakistan's blasphemy statutes on Nov. 8. "In the entire year that I have spent in this jail," she told Compass, "I have not been asked even once for my statement in court. Not by the lawyers and not by the judge." Noreen said the triggering incident resulted from a "planned conspiracy" to "teach her a lesson" because villagers in Ittanwali, near Nankana Sahib about 75 kilometers (47 miles) from Lahore, disliked her and her family. "They have been saying that I confessed to my crime, but the fact is that I said I was sorry for any word that I may have said during the

argument that may have hurt their feelings,” she said. “What my village people have accused me of is a complete lie.”

In spite of the trauma the blasphemy laws have visited on Pakistan’s minorities as well as on Muslims, the U.N. General Assembly voted on Dec. 21 to pass a “Defamation of Religions” resolution that lends international legitimacy to such laws. The resolution was adopted with 79 votes in favor, 67 votes against and 40 abstentions – the smallest level of support it has received since it was first voted on 10 years ago.

2. Christians Increasingly Targeted in Iraq

An Islamic extremist assault on a Syrian Catholic Church in Baghdad on Oct. 31, one of the bloodiest attacks on the country’s dwindling Christian community, culminated a year of increasing violence against Christians in Iraq. Seven or eight Islamic militants stormed into Our Lady of Salvation church during evening mass after detonating bombs in the neighborhood, gunning down two policemen at the stock exchange across the street, and blowing up their own car. More than 100 people were reportedly attending mass. A militant organization called the Islamic State of Iraq, which has links to al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, claimed responsibility for the attack. The militants sprayed the sanctuary with bullets. Iraqi security forces launched an assault on the church building, and it was unclear how many of the 58 deaths resulted from the raid; the militants reportedly began killing hostages when the security force assault began.

Political tensions ahead of parliamentary elections in Iraq on March 7 left at least eight Chaldean Christians dead and hundreds of families fleeing Mosul. “The concern of Christians in Mosul is growing in the face of what is happening in the city,” said Chaldean Archbishop of Kirkuk Louis Sako. “The tension and struggle between political forces is creating an atmosphere of chaos and congestion. Christians are victims of political tension between political groups, but maybe also by fundamentalist sectarian cleansing.” On Feb. 23 the killing of

Eshoe Marokee, a Christian, and his two sons in their home in front of other family members sent shock waves across the Christian community. The murder took place amid a string of murders that triggered the mass exodus of families to the surrounding towns and provinces. "It is not the first time Christians are attacked or killed," said the archbishop of the Syrian Catholic Church in Mosul, Georges Casmoussa. "The new [element] in this question is to be killed in their own homes."

Three Christian students were killed and 180 injured in a May 2 bomb attack on a bus outside Mosul. The blasts targeted three buses full of Christians traveling to the University of Mosul for classes. The convoy of buses, which brings Christian students from villages east of Mosul, was making its daily route accompanied by two Iraqi army cars. By year's end it was estimated that only 334,000 Christians were left in Iraq, less than half of the number in 1991.

3. Afghan Christian Accused of 'Apostasy' Faces Death Sentence

A Christian in Afghanistan facing "apostasy" charges punishable by death was still without legal representation by year's end after authorities blocked a foreign lawyer's attempt to visit him in prison, sources said. A Christian lawyer from the region who requested anonymity travelled to Kabul on behalf of Christian legal rights organization Advocates International in November to represent 45-year-old Said Musa (alternatively spelled Sayed Mossa). Authorities denied him access to Musa and to his indictment file.

After several court hearing postponements, Musa appeared before a judge on Nov. 27 without prior notice. The judge sent Musa's case file to the attorney general's office for corrections, according to the lawyer. The prosecutor in charge of western Kabul, Din Mohammad Quraishi, said two men, Musa and Ahmad Shah, were accused of conversion to another religion. But Musa's letters from prison and other sources indicate that Shah is a government informant posing as a

Christian. Musa and Shah appeared before the judge on Nov. 27 “shackled and chained” to each other, according to a source who was present. Musa and the other sources claim Shah sent images of worshipping Christians to the country’s most popular broadcaster, Noorin TV, which aired them in May. The broadcast put in motion the events that got Musa arrested, sources said. In early June the deputy secretary of the Afghan Parliament, Abdul Sattar Khawasi, called for the execution of converts from Islam.

Another Afghan Christian is in prison for his faith, sources said. Shoib Assadullah, 25, was arrested on Oct. 21 for giving a New Testament to a man who reportedly turned him in to authorities. Assadullah is in a holding jail in a district of Mazar-e-Sharif, in northern Afghanistan.

4. Somali Girl Killed for Embracing Christ

In a year in which Islamic militants from the al-Qaeda-linked al Shabaab group killed more underground Christian leaders, civilian Muslims also claimed at least one victim. A 17-year-old girl in Somalia who converted to Christianity from Islam was shot to death on Nov. 25 in an apparent “honor killing,” area sources said. Nurta Mohamed Farah had fled her village of Bardher, Gedo Region to Galgadud Region to live with relatives after her parents tortured her for leaving Islam. Area sources said they strongly suspected that the two unidentified men who shot her in the chest and head with a pistol were relatives or acting on their behest. She was killed in Abudwaq district about 200 meters from where she had taken refuge.

Her parents had severely beaten her for leaving Islam and regularly shackled her to a tree at their home, Christian sources said. She had been confined to her home since May 10, when her family found out that she had embraced Christianity, said a Christian leader who visited the area. Area Christians had reported that while living in her home village, Farah was put in a small, dark room at night. Her parents had taken her to a doctor who prescribed medication for a “mental illness.”

Alarmed by her determination to keep her faith, her father, Hassan Kafi Ilmi, and mother, Hawo Godane Haf, decided she had gone crazy and forced her to take the prescribed medication, but it had no effect in swaying her from her faith, a source said. Traditionally, he added, many Somalis believe the Quran cures the sick, especially the mentally ill, so the Islamic scripture was recited to her twice a week. She had declined her family's offer of forgiveness in exchange for renouncing Christianity, the source said. The confinement began after the medication and punishments failed.

5. Mass Attacks on Christians in Nigeria

Large-scale attacks on Christians – interspersed with smaller, isolated assaults that were often more motivated by property disputes than anti-Christian sentiment – hit Nigeria in 2010. On March 7, hundreds of Christians were killed in three farming villages near Jos by ethnic Fulani Muslims. The mostly ethnic Berom victims included many women and children killed with machetes by rampaging Fulani herdsmen. About 75 houses were also burned. State Information Commissioner Gregory Yenlong confirmed that about 500 persons were killed in the attacks, which took place mainly in Dogo Nahawa, Zot and Rastat villages. The assailants reportedly came on foot from a neighboring state; security forces had been alerted of a possible attack on the villages but did not act beforehand. Bishop Andersen Bok, national coordinator of the Plateau State Elders Christian Fellowship, along with group Secretary General Musa Pam, described the attacks as yet another “jihad and provocation on Christians.” The Christian leaders said in a statement, “Eyewitnesses say the Hausa Fulani Muslim militants were chanting ‘Allah Akbar,’ broke into houses, cutting human beings, including children and women, with their knives and cutlasses.”

Muslim Fulani herdsmen unleashed more horrific violence on two Christian villages in Plateau state on March 17, killing 13 persons, including a pregnant woman and children. In attacks

presumably over disputed property but with a level of violence characteristic of jihadist method and motive, men in military camouflage and others in customary clothing also burned 20 houses in Byei and Baten villages, in the Riyom Local Government Area of the state, about 45 kilometers (29 miles) from the state capital, Jos. The ethnic Berom Christians, who live as farmers, have long faced off with Fulani nomads who graze their cattle on the Beroms' land. Because the style of killing was typical of jihadist radicals, Christian leaders suspected Islamic extremists are encouraging the attacks, throwing religious gas on low-burning land and ethnic conflicts. Dalyop Nyango Mandung, a survivor of the attack whose 90-year-old mother, Ngo Hwo Dongo, was killed in her room, told newsmen that the villagers were awakened by gunshots from the Muslim herdsmen who were barricading their houses. Mandung, however, said the assailants were wearing military fatigues rather than the customary clothing of Fulani herders.

Attacks from another quarter came late in the year, when the Islamic sect Boko Haram exploded several bombs in Christian areas of Jos on Dec. 24, including one at a Catholic church, that killed scores of people. At the same time, the group killed a Baptist pastor and five other Christians on Christmas Eve in Maiduguri, capital of Borno state in northern Nigeria. The Rev. Bulus Marwa and the other Christians were killed in the Dec. 24 attacks on Victory Baptist Church in Alemderi and a Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN) congregation in Sinimari. Another 25 persons were said to have been injured during the serial attacks by the Islamic group.

The Boko Haram members reportedly first stormed the COCIN church in two vehicles and detonated bombs that shattered the gate of the worship center and killed the security guard. Danjuma Akawu, who survived the attack on the Baptist church, said "they hacked the two choir members using knives and a petrol bomb before heading to the pastor's residence, where he

was killed.” Speaking during a visit to the Baptist church on Saturday (Dec. 25), Borno Gov. Ali Modu Sheriff noted that the attack on the Christian community was an attempt by Boko Haram to create conflict between Christians and Muslims in the state.

6. Hostilities toward Christians in Egypt Hit Boiling Point

In a year that began with a drive-by shooting after a Coptic Christmas Eve service on Jan. 6 that killed six Christians, hostilities from Egypt’s Muslim majority toward the Coptic Christian minority reached a fever pitch as the year wore on, with weeks of protests against Christians. Tensions grew after the wife of a Coptic priest, Camilia Zakher, disappeared in July. According to government sources and published media reports, Zakher left her home after a heated argument with her husband. But Coptic demonstrators, who started gathering to protest at churches after Zakher disappeared, claimed she had been kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam.

The next month, Egyptian media reported in error that Egypt’s State Security Intelligence had seized a ship from Israel laden with explosives headed for the son of an official of the Coptic Orthodox church, and rumors began that Copts were stockpiling weapons in the basements of their churches with plans to overthrow the Muslim majority. The Front of Religious Scholars then called for a complete boycott of Christians in Egypt. The group called Christians “immoral,” labeled them “terrorists” and said Muslims should not patronize their businesses or even say “hello” to them. When a group of Islamic extremists on Oct. 31 burst into Our Lady of Salvation church in Baghdad, Iraq during evening mass and began spraying the sanctuary with gunfire, the militant organization that took responsibility said Christians in Egypt also would be targeted if its demands were not met. The threats against Christians caused a flurry of activity at churches in Egypt, and security increased throughout the country.

In the Jan. 6 shooting, three men suspected to be Muslims,

including one with a criminal record sought by police, were in a moving car from which automatic gunfire hit Coptic Christians who had attended services at St. John's Church in Nag Hammadi, 455 kilometers (282 miles) south of Cairo. A Muslim security guard was also killed, and nine other Coptic Christians were wounded, with three of them in critical condition. Copts, along with many Orthodox communities, celebrate Christmas on Jan. 7.

7. Christian Villagers in Laos Driven into Jungle

Officials and residents of Katin village in Ta Oih district, Saravan Province, on Dec. 26 destroyed rice paddies farmed by 11 Christian families previously living in the village after the expulsion of another seven families on Dec. 23. Residents drained water from the rice paddies, burned fencing that protected the crop from animals and stomped on new seedlings to ensure the rice would not grow, advocacy group Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF) reported. The fields were destroyed just a few days after the Katin village chief and other village authorities armed with guns entered the homes of another seven Christian families, totaling 15 people, and ordered them to give up their faith. When they refused, officials marched them out of the village and warned them not to return.

Two of these families professed faith after officials expelled 11 Christian families last January, and another four families joined them after officials in July threatened to shoot any of the expelled Christians who attempted to return to Katin. Yet another family professed allegiance to Jesus Christ after officials in late October warned that the six Christian families would be evicted in January 2011 if they held to their beliefs. The newly-expelled Christians then sought shelter with the 11 families who were still living at the edge of the jungle despite assurances from provincial and district officials that they had every right to remain in Katin village. HRWLRF representatives believe district-level

officials may have secretly approved the expulsions. "Village officials don't usually do anything without informally consulting the district head," a spokesman told Compass.

When village officials last January expelled the 11 families, totaling 48 people, for refusing to give up their faith, the Christians built simple shelters at the edge of the jungle but suffered from a lack of adequate food and water. Officials also destroyed their houses, confiscated livestock and essential registration documents and denied their children access to the village school. In May, village officials granted the families permission to take rice stored in their family rice barns to ward off starvation. Shortly afterwards, members of the 11 families returned off-season to farm their family rice paddies, adjacent to the village, in order to preserve land rights and maintain their food supplies.

8. Foreign Christians Suddenly Expelled from Morocco

Between March and June authorities expelled 128 foreign Christians in an effort to purge the country of any foreign Christian influences. In April, nearly 7,000 Muslim religious leaders backed the deportations by signing a document describing the work of Christians within Morocco as "moral rape" and "religious terrorism." The statement from the religious leaders came amid a nationwide mudslinging campaign geared to vilify Christians in Morocco for "proselytism" – widely perceived as bribing people to change their faith. In the same time period, Moroccan authorities applied pressure on Moroccan converts to Christianity through interrogations, searches and arrests. Christians on the ground said that, although these have not continued, there is still a general sense that the government is increasingly intolerant of Christian activities.

The government's portrayal of foreign Christians created an atmosphere in which national Christians suffered more societal harassment and discrimination. By the end of the year more than 150 foreign Christians were deported or declared persona

non grata, with police arresting and interrogating national Christians in the search for evidence to justify the expulsion of the expatriates.

9. Wave of Persecution in India's Karnataka State

A report in March found a wave of persecution had struck Karnataka state, where Christians faced more than 1,000 attacks in 500 days. An independent investigation by a former judge of the Karnataka High Court found that the spate began on Sept. 14, 2008, when at least 12 churches were attacked in one day in Karnataka's Mangalore city, in Dakshina Kannada district, and the number of attacks reached 1,000 in January 2010. "On Jan. 26 – the day we celebrated India's Republic Day – Karnataka's 1,000th attack took place in Mysore city," said Justice Michael Saldanha, former judge of the Karnataka High Court. Saldanha told Compass the figure was based on reports from faith-based organizations. Blaming the state government for the attacks, Saldanha said the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had "outdone Orissa." The wave of persecution in Karnataka began as fallout of the anti-Christian mayhem in eastern Orissa state, where Maoists killed a Vishwa Hindu Parishad leader on Aug. 23, 2008, with Hindu extremists wrongly accusing Christians. The attacks in Orissa's Kandhamal district, the epicenter of the bloodbath, killed more than 100 people and burned 4,640 houses, 252 churches and 13 educational institutions.

Karnataka Home Minister V.S. Acharya denied the results of the inquiry. "The allegation of Karnataka having faced 1,000 attacks is absolutely false," Acharya told Compass. "Karnataka is the most peaceful state in India, and the people are law-abiding." But the stream of reports of violence against Christians in Karnataka continued throughout the year. In addition to the attacks, numerous Christians also have faced false charges of fraudulent or forced conversions throughout Karnataka. "I have been to many police stations where complaints of [forced] conversions have been lodged against

Christians, and when I asked the police why they were acting on frivolous complaints, most of them told me that they had orders from above,” Saldanha said. In his report, he notes that Christians “are dragged to the police station under false allegations, immediately locked up, beaten up and denied bail by the lower judiciary, which functions as the loyal partner of the police department and refuses bail on the grounds that ‘the police have objected.’” The report says 468 Christian workers in rural areas had been targeted with such actions since September 2008. “Numerous others have been threatened and beaten up,” the report states. “The police are totally out of control, with the lower judiciary having abdicated its constitutional obligation of safeguarding the citizens’ rights, particularly from a tyrannical state machinery, while the state government proclaims that everything is peaceful.”

Chief Minister Bookanakere Siddalingappa Yeddyurappa and Home Minister Acharya belong to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (Hindu nationalist conglomerate or the RSS), believed to be the parent organization of the BJP, Saldanha pointed out. He also said that although the attacks on Christians had turned public sentiment against the BJP in Karnataka, the party seemed to care little as both opposition parties, the Congress Party and the regional Janata Dal- Secular (JD-S) party, were “in shambles” in the state.

In May 2009 the BJP lost national elections, and since then sections of the party are in desperation, he said, adding, “Perhaps this is one of the reasons why attacks continue to happen in Karnataka.” The BJP came to sole power in Karnataka in May 2008. Prior to that, it ruled in alliance with the JD-S party for 20 months. There are a little more than 1 million Christians in Karnataka, where the total population is over 52 million.

10. China Releases Gao Zhisheng – and then Seizes Him Again

Christian human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng, captured in February 2009 and released by Chinese officials on April 6,

2010, went missing again on April 20. Bob Fu of the China Aid Association (CAA) said Gao went back into the hands of Chinese security forces. Gao, initially seized from his home in Shaanxi Province on Feb. 4, 2009 and held incommunicado by security officials for 13 months, was permitted to phone family members and colleagues in late March before officials finally returned him to his Beijing apartment on April 6. Gao had told a reporter from the South China Morning Post (SCMP) that he expected to travel to Urumqi within days of his release to visit his in-laws, and witnesses saw him leaving his apartment sometime between April 9 and 12, SCMP reported on April 30. Gao's father-in-law reportedly confirmed that Gao arrived at his home with an escort of four police officers but spent just one night there before police took him away again. Gao phoned his father-in-law shortly before he was due to board a flight back to Beijing on April 20. He promised to call again after returning home but failed to do so, according to the SCMP report. Fu said he believes international pressure forced authorities to allow Gao a brief re-appearance to prove that he was alive before seizing him again to prevent information leaking out about his experiences over the past year.

During a previous detention in 2007, Gao's captors brutally tortured him and threatened him with death if he spoke about his treatment. Gao later described the torture in an open letter published by CAA in 2009. He had come to the attention of authorities when he began to investigate the persecution of house church Christians and Falun Gong members. In 2005 he wrote a series of open letters to President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao accusing the government of torturing Falun Gong members. When the letters appeared, authorities revoked Gao's law license and shut down his law firm, sources told CAA. He was given a suspended three-year jail sentence in December 2006, following a confession that Gao later claimed was made under extreme duress, including torture and threats against his wife and children. Gao was then confined to his

Beijing apartment under constant surveillance – forbidden to leave his home, use his phone or computer or otherwise communicate with the outside world, according to a report by The New York Times. A self-taught lawyer and a Communist Party member until 2005, Gao was once recognized by the Ministry of Justice as one of the mainland's top 10 lawyers for his pro bono work on human rights cases, according to SCMP.