

Syria Crackdown Targets Christians

✖ Human rights groups say Syrian authorities arrested more than 1,000 people in the latest sweep aimed at crushing the uprising against President Bashar Assad.

Many dozens more are missing in the latest brutal crackdown of the six-week-old revolt. Tom Doyle of E3 Partners says it's not over yet. "They're going to flex their muscles even more to squelch any desire for rebellion," he says. "They're going to try to get to the heart of it."

The calls for Assad's ouster spread quickly across the nation of some 23 million. Blame for the upheaval is being laid on outside groups who have come in to take advantage of protests to stir up unrest and destabilize Syria.

Christian leaders agree. Doyle explains, "We've gotten some SOS messages from believers from Syria saying, 'Pray for us. There's so much going on right now, and believers have been targeted in some areas.'"

Their reports indicate that outsiders are causing trouble in a hotbed. "I don't think the government is officially doing that," says Doyle. "I think they have their hands full with the protestors, but there are some radical groups. They sponsor Hezbollah out of that country. I think we're seeing some of that around the country."

Regardless of who is causing the trouble, it's the believers who bear the brunt. Syria is one of several Muslim countries in which Christians have survived for centuries by accepting the second-class status known in Islam as "dhimmi." In times of trouble, it builds exponentially for believers. Doyle notes, "There was a real surge of oppression and persecution in Syria. One leader in Syria told us that they had not seen

this much persecution in their nation since the Ottoman Empire.”

Whether or not other events, like the killing of Osama bin Laden, will add fuel to the fires of Syria is yet unknown. Often, extremist Muslims consider Christianity a Western religion. When upset by Western nation politics, they will take out their ire on the Christians.

Still, the Church is standing strong. “Some of the leaders in the countries that are out there sharing Christ and making a difference—they know that they’ve been targeted. There’s a great camaraderie there in the midst of that persecution. It’s built the church stronger.”

Doyle says their partners know what they’re risking as they live openly as followers of Christ. Especially in turbulent times, “We need to pray for their safety. We need to pray that their boldness continues, because during these times when there is so much persecution, it’s a time when people are much more open to the gospel.”