

African Countries Surge on 2013 Persecution List

Persecution of Christians in Africa vastly increased in 2012, according to the Open Doors “2013 World Watch List” of 50 countries where Christians face the most severe persecution for their faith.

The number of countries on the African continent sharply increased on the annual list due to the increasing influence of Islam, says Open Doors, an organization that supports **persecuted Christians** worldwide.

Mali is a newcomer on the list and holds the No. 7 position. Tanzania (No. 24), Kenya (No. 40), Uganda (No. 47) and Niger (No. 50) also moved onto the World Watch List. Ethiopia is one of the strongest risers (from No. 38 to No. 15) on the list. In addition, the small African country of Eritrea made the Top 10 for the first time at No. 10. Libya climbed from No. 26 to No. 17.

North Korea is still No. 1 when it comes to **persecution of Christians**. For the 11th consecutive year, the hermit Communist country heads the “World Watch List.” Possessing a Bible alone can be a reason for a Christian to be executed or sent to a prison camp along with three generations of his or her family. It is estimated that between 50,000 and 70,000 Christians suffer in horrific prison camps. The intense persecution has continued under new leader Kim Jong-Un. The number of defectors to China greatly decreased in 2012. Half of those who try to defect to China do not make it.

“Nothing much has changed under new North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un,” says Open Doors spokesman Jerry Dykstra. “In fact, persecution of Christians has increased. Reportedly one labor camp alone could hold up to 6,000 Christians.”

Apart from North Korea, the Top 10 on the “World Watch List” consists of eight countries where extreme Islam poses the largest threat for Christians. They are (from No. 2 to No. 9) Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Maldives, Mali, Iran and Yemen. Worldwide, Open Doors reports an increase in the persecution of Christians.

Attacks and Infiltration

The most notable trend Open Doors researchers found was the increase of persecution in Africa. Fundamentalist variations of Islam rapidly gain influence on the continent. On the one hand, this was due to focused attacks, such as **Boko Haram** in Nigeria (No. 13). On the other, the influence of Islam increased through infiltration in different social and economic areas. Open Doors saw a similar pattern in several African countries.

“We do not necessarily distinguish one overall plan from one source in the whole of Africa. However, we do see that radical Islamic groups are patiently waiting for the right time to show their power,” Dykstra explains. “Apart from the pattern of violent attacks, we see that **radical Muslims** are infiltrating into politics, business and the judicial power, such as introducing Sharia family courts. On a number of occasions, Muslims were ready to step into a power vacuum. Take Mali, for example, where Touareg rebels and Muslim fundamentalists gained power in April 2012.”

Mali Was a Model Country

Of the African countries, Mali is the most noticeable newcomer on the World Watch List due to its sudden emergence as No. 7. The situation in Mali escalated after the coup.

“Mali used to be a model country,” says Dykstra. “The situation in the north used to be a bit tense but Christians and even missionaries could be active. Currently the situation in northern Mali is somewhat similar to Saudi Arabia. Christians are simply no longer allowed to be there.”

A pastor from the northern part of Mali told Open Doors that he was informed that Muslim fundamentalists were planning to kill all Christians. He warned all the members of his congregation to leave. Hundreds of Christians fled from the north to the south of the country or neighboring countries.

Syria Makes Big Jump

Outside of Mali, Syria made the largest jump on the "World Watch List." The country is No. 11 on the list, compared to No. 36 in 2012. For years under the regime of President Assad, Christians were allowed the freedom to worship but not evangelize. They have now come under pressure from rebels fighting against the regime. To add to this, jihadists entered Syria with an anti-Christian agenda making life for Christians in the country virtually impossible. Tens of thousands of Christians have fled.

China Continues Drop

China continued its descent on the World Watch List. Five years ago, the country was ranked in the Top 10, but now it has dropped from No. 21 to No. 37. The government still considers the church to be a political movement and wishes to be informed of all Christian activity. However, house searches, arrests and the confiscation of Bibles and Christian books no longer occur on a large scale. Instead, the government forces many church leaders to keep an accounting for their whereabouts—a way to keep them subdued and under control. At least 100 Chinese Christians are still in prison.

Difficult Situation in Egypt

Egypt has also descended on the "World Watch List," going from No. 15 to No. 25. Nevertheless, the country's score does not show any improvement. The drop is a result of Open Doors' change in methodology to monitor and chart the persecution of Christians. The Christians with a Muslim background are facing the most serious problems. Apart from that, Egypt is going through a difficult stage. Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, are gaining more power after the election of

Mohammed Morsi last summer.

Change in Methodology

More than ever before, the “World Watch List” provides an insight in the overall spectrum of the persecution of Christians in all spheres of life (private, family, community, national and church.) The freedom to come together and the degree in which Christians are exposed to acts of violence are also included in the monitoring. This results in a balanced scoring, taking into account both the impact of violent incidents and less visible, structural developments threatening the position of Christians.