

Despite International Attention, Turkish Persecution Levels Worsen

This time last year, American pastor Andrew Brunson was preparing for his trial in Turkey after being imprisoned on false charges of espionage and spying since October 2016. After the work of the U.S. government, the commitment of countless religious freedom advocates and the prayers of thousands of Christians, Brunson was released Oct. 12, 2018.

The situation, however, has not improved for many of Brunson's fellow Christians and former congregants in Turkey, according to Save the Persecuted Christians (STPC), which advocates on behalf of 300 million Christians facing heavy persecution worldwide.

In fact, *Christian Today* reports that Pastor Brunson's ordeal (view a timeline here) "triggered a significant increase in public hate against the country's small Protestant community.

"The report cited the Turkish Association of Protestant Churches, which said the number of attacks designed to "incite hatred of Protestants 'purely due to their beliefs' in Turkey's local, national and social media outlets had seriously increased during Brunson's arrest, jailing and two-year trial."

"Millions of Christians here in the U.S. celebrated Pastor Brunson's long-awaited freedom," said Dede Laugesen, executive director of Save the Persecuted Christians. "But despite that joy, we must never forget that there are millions of Christians who are not free to believe in Christ, many in Pastor Brunson's former community. His experience made international news, but millions of Christians around the world do not share this same notoriety and are therefore

suffering in silence and alone. Believers in Christ are still jailed, persecuted in their own communities or even shunned in their own homes.”

After being detained for about 18 months, Brunson’s trial began April 16, 2018. At that time, a judge returned the pastor to prison until the next hearing that July.

Turkey ranks as No. 26 on the 2019 World Watch List for “very high” levels of persecution according to Open Doors USA, which tracks Christian persecution worldwide. “Over the last year, the situation in Turkey has deteriorated significantly for Christians as President Erdogan’s powers grow,” Open Doors reports. “Since July 2016’s failed coup, Erdogan’s government has dropped its mask of supporting democracy and now openly restricts freedom throughout society.”

Ongoing persecution of Christians in Turkey is illustrated through Save the Persecuted Christians’ traveling exhibit called “The People of the Cross,” which displays heartbreaking photos and facts about several countries where Christian persecution is commonplace.

Specifically, one banner highlighted Pastor Brunson’s plight with these words: “Despite letters from 66 U.S. Senators and 50 members of European Parliament and repeated requests from President Trump and his administration, Turkish President Erdogan’s prosecutors insist that Pastor Brunson serve a life-sentence—an explicit and ominous warning to other Christians, especially those who lack the pastor’s celebrity and international support.”

Another banner in the exhibit highlights “brutal persecution” in Turkey, where just .02 percent of Turks are Christian. “Oppression has reduced Christianity from 20 percent before WWI to near extinction,” the banner reads. “No clergy may be ordained; confiscated church properties become museums or mosques—or simply deteriorate. Some of the world’s oldest

Christian communities are disappearing.”

Additional banners in “The People of the Cross” exhibit detail the tragedy that children, women, the elderly and Christians in general experience when persecuted in countries around the world. Each of 24 banners feature images, facts and quotes from recent news stories about the persecution of Christians in multiple countries, such as North Korea, where Christians are tortured or worse; Syria, where Christian girls and women have been sold into sex slavery; East Africa, where terrorists are exterminating Christians with genocidal intent; and Nigeria where two of the world’s most violent terrorist groups surround and slaughter entire villages of Christians. A majority of the countries highlighted in the banners are high on the World Watch List.

The exhibit premiered in July 2018 at the U.S. Capitol as a side event to the first-ever U.S. Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom. Since then, it has toured the United States, reaching tens of thousands. “The People of the Cross” exhibit is available for churches, public venues and special events. To learn more about hosting “The People of the Cross,” contact Save the Persecuted Christians or visit the website, where panels are available to view online.

The mission of Save the Persecuted Christians is to save lives and save souls by holding the persecutors accountable and creating costs for their crimes against humanity. To that end, it will disseminate actionable information about the magnitude of such crimes and bring to bear a movement of concerned Americans determined to hold persecutors accountable for such crimes and create real costs for perpetrating them against those who follow Jesus.

According to Aid to the Church in Need, which released its biannual report on Religious Freedom in the World in November, over 300 million Christians experience persecution. According to Open Doors USA World Watch List, 245 million Christians are

victims of high to extreme levels of persecution (i.e., torture, rape, sex-slavery, expulsion, murder and genocide), an increase of 14 percent over 2018. Open Doors also estimates 1 in 9 of the world's Christians experience persecution and that every month: 345 Christians are killed, often in public and without regard to gender or age; 219 Christians are abducted and imprisoned indefinitely without trial; and 106 churches are demolished.

Because most of these crimes are not covered in the media, Save the Persecuted Christians developed a dedicated news aggregator—to capture current instances of persecution and to provide readers an easy way to share these heartbreaking stories with others.

With so much of the world's Christian population being attacked, imprisoned and/or exiled for their beliefs, such as believers in Turkey, the need has never been greater for the sort of grassroots campaign STPC's SaveUs Movement is working to foster. Its efforts are modeled after a miraculously successful one that helped free another population suffering from heavy persecution—Soviet Jews—by penalizing those in the Kremlin responsible for such repression. Through this movement, Save the Persecuted Christians endeavors to provide American policymakers with the popular support they need to effect real change worldwide and alleviate systemically the suffering being experienced by so many of those following Christ.

Listen to the podcast to hear more about Brunson.