

How Coronavirus Is Affecting Religious Freedom Around the World

The worldwide coronavirus pandemic is affecting every aspect of life: family, education, work and business. For millions around the globe, COVID-19 is also affecting religious freedom.

Save the Persecuted Christians (STPC), which advocates on behalf of hundreds of millions of Christians facing heavy persecution worldwide, is pointing to a new fact sheet from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which states: “Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in December 2019, governments have begun implementing various public health interventions to control the spread of the illness. These interventions have impacted billions of people worldwide and often involve large public programs, restrictions on freedom of movement and government management of critical resources.”

The mission of Save the Persecuted Christians is to save lives and save souls by disseminating actionable information about the magnitude of the persecution taking place globally and by mobilizing concerned Americans for the purpose of disincentivizing further attacks on those who follow Jesus. And the manner in which the coronavirus has further impacted religious liberties has been worrisome, said STPC Executive Director Dede Laugesen.

“When the world deals with a crisis such as this—the coronavirus pandemic—religious freedom is often affected first, especially in countries that are closed off to Christianity,” Laugesen said. “Situations like these also create opportunities for persecutors to exploit the crisis and

operate with a greater sense of impunity. Therefore, it remains imperative for believers who do enjoy religious liberties to continue to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are at risk of anti-Christian violence.”

The USCIRF fact sheet continues:

It is important for governments to account for religious freedom concerns in their responses to COVID-19, for reasons of both legality and policy effectiveness. From a legal perspective, international law requires governments to preserve individual human rights, including religious freedom, when taking measures to protect public health even in times of crisis. From an efficacy perspective, considering religious freedom concerns can help build trust between governments and religious groups, who in past public health crises have played a critical role in delivering health interventions.

In the fact sheet, USCIRF also points to international standards on freedom of religion or belief and public health. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) are the primary international provisions securing the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) under international human rights law. Both use similar language in providing robust protections to FoRB, and in defining the narrow circumstances under which states may lawfully limit it in furtherance of an identified state interest, including public health.

The USCIRF document aims to educate all about countries where the government or societal response to COVID-19 is impacting freedom of religion:

—**China:** Human rights advocates are concerned that COVID-19—and the government’s response—risk exacerbating ongoing religious freedom violations. As noted in USCIRF’s 2019 Annual Report,

the Chinese government has detained more than 1 million Uighur and other Muslims in concentration camps in Xinjiang since April 2017. The combination of limited access to medical resources and large concentrations of elderly detainees could lead to a humanitarian disaster if the virus reaches any of those camps. In addition, there are reports that authorities have forced Uighurs to work in factories throughout the country to compensate for decreased output during the quarantine. In January, authorities quarantined millions of people across Xinjiang without advance warning. There are reports that some Uighur residents in the city of Ghulja have limited access to food and local officials have demanded payments in order to bring supplies.

–**South Korea:** The nation provides a vivid example of how public health emergencies can increase the risk to marginalized religious groups. Even before the recent coronavirus outbreak, members of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus had reported facing pressure from mainstream Protestant groups, and in some cases being subjected to deprogramming. The Shincheonji church has a reputation for secrecy, to the extent that some members do not reveal their religious affiliation to family or friends—a precaution members claim is necessary because of the hostility they face. The church claims more than 300,000 members worldwide in more than 20 countries, including in Wuhan, China.

–**Iran:** Iran has suffered significantly more cases of COVID-19 than other countries in the Middle East. As the home of several major Shi'a shrines as well as the Qom and Mashhad *hawzas* (seminaries), Iran is visited by many people who travel to and from the country for pilgrimage or to study. As a result, in the wake of the virus' spread, several countries have imposed travel restrictions to and from Iran, which has limited these religious activities. Iran's lack of sufficient medical resources has exacerbated the spread of the virus, which has reached members of Iran's government.

–Saudi Arabia: Saudi Arabia announced its first case of coronavirus on March 2, 2020, but had been preparing for the virus well beforehand. On Feb. 26, the kingdom banned foreigners from traveling to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina over fears it would exacerbate the spread of the virus. The government set up an online portal where those who had paid for pilgrimage visas could obtain refunds. On March 5, it temporarily closed the Grand Mosque in Mecca for disinfecting and restricted entry afterward.

–Italy and The Vatican: As of the beginning of March, the worst outbreak of the coronavirus outside Asia has emerged in Italy. In response, the Italian government issued a quarantine of impacted regions and mandated the closure of schools, museums, theaters and other public gatherings, including religious services. In compliance with those regulations, several Italian dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church canceled public Masses and suspended Ash Wednesday services. Around the northern city of Milan, worshippers are only allowed to visit churches for private prayer and cannot sit together in large groups. Though some churches have broadcast their services, some religious leaders have questioned the need to cease religious services and asked regional governments to allow the celebration of Mass. In Milan—home to around 7,000 Jews, the largest number in Italy after Rome—Jewish community institutions such as synagogues and schools have suspended their operations.

With so much of the world's Christian population being imprisoned and/or harassed for their beliefs, 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. {eoa}