

Islamic Countries Dominate Open Doors 2011 World Watch List

North Korea ranks number one in the Open Doors World Watch List for the ninth straight year, but Islamic countries are quickly gaining ground as the most dangerous for Christians. Eight of the top 10 countries on the 2011 list have Islamic majorities and persecution has increased in seven of them.

The top 10 in order are North Korea, Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Maldives, Yemen, Iraq, Uzbekistan and Laos, which has a Communist government. Iraq is new to the top 10 list while Mauritania dropped out, going from No. 8 to No. 13, according to the annual list compiled by Open Doors International that tracks Christian life in 77 societies and ranks the top 50 most dangerous environments among them.

“Being a Muslim Background Believer or ‘Secret Believer’ in a Muslim-dominated country puts a bulls-eye on the backs of Christians,” says Open Doors USA president and CEO Dr. Carl Moeller. “There is either no freedom to believe or little freedom of religion. And as the 2011 World Watch List reflects, the persecution of Christians in these Muslim countries continues to increase.

Iran is clamping down on a growing house church movement. Thousands of believers in Afghanistan cluster deep underground. Saudi Arabia refuses to allow any Saudi person to convert to Christianity. Somalia is ruled by bloodthirsty terrorists threatening to kill Christian aid workers who feed the nation’s starving, impoverished people. Yemen is determined to expel all Christian workers. And Iraq saw extremists massacre 58 Christians in a Baghdad cathedral on Oct. 31. Of the top 30 countries, only seven have a source

other than Islamic extremists as the main persecutors of Christians.

Iraq saw conditions decline for Christian religious freedom, jumping from No. 17 to No. 8.

The country has seen a Christian exodus in recent years in the face of organized violence by extremist militia, with an estimated 334,000 Christians. That's a more than 50 percent drop since Saddam Hussein's regime toppled in 2003. At least 90 Christians were martyred last year in Iraq while hundreds more were injured in bomb and gun attacks. More killings have taken place in the past two weeks, Open Doors reports.

Here are some additional highlights from the list:

- The country with the largest Christian community in the top 15 is Pakistan with more than 5 million believers. Twenty-nine Christians were martyred in the reporting period with at least one killing occurring every month.
- Afghanistan, up from No. 6 to No. 3, saw ugly demonstrations when footage of Muslims being baptized was shown on network television.
- The year's grisliest headlines were found in No. 26 Nigeria, however, where a staggering 2,000 Christians lost their lives in riots caused by Muslim extremists in some of the northern states in the country.
- Egypt is ranked No. 19 on the WWL and could be a focus of persecution this year as 21 Christians were killed in a bomb blast on New Year's Day outside the Church of Two Saints in Alexandria.
- While persecution continues to increase in Muslim-dominated countries, there is no question that North Korea deserves its No. 1 ranking, Open Doors concludes. The state's attitude towards Christians is extremely hostile. There is no freedom to build churches or to worship in homes. Possession of Christian materials is punishable by death.

Open Doors points to North Korea's discovery of a group of 23 Christians in May 2010. The police found Bibles and other Christian literature. Three people were publicly executed, and the others disappeared within the infamous Yodok Prison camp. Open Doors says the number of Christian martyrs in North Korea is hard to discern because it is such a secretive society, but hundreds of believers have been arrested.