

North Korea Remains Greatest Persecutor of Christians, World Watch List Reports

For the 12th consecutive year, the hermit Communist country of North Korea remains the world's most restrictive nation in which to practice Christianity, according to the Open Doors 2014 World Watch List (WWL).

However, a major trend the WWL tracked in 2013 was a marked increase in persecution for Christian communities in states that are commonly regarded as "failed." A failed country is defined "as a weak state where social and political structures have collapsed to the point where government has little or no control."

The top 10 countries where Christians faced the most pressure and violence in the 2013 reporting period of the 2014 WWL are North Korea, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Maldives, Pakistan, Iran and Yemen. For the complete list, go to .

Overwhelmingly, the main engine driving persecution of Christians in 36 of the top 50 countries is Islamic extremism, with the most violent region being the states of the African Sahel belt (a semi-arid zone extending from Senegal on the Atlantic Ocean eastward to Sudan and the Red Sea), where a fifth of the world's Christians meet one-seventh of the world's Muslims in perilous proximity.

The WWL top 10 contains six failed states: Somalia (No. 2), Syria (No. 3), Iraq (No. 4), Afghanistan (No. 5), Pakistan (No. 8) and Yemen (No. 10). Another newly failed, war-torn state—the Central African Republic (CAR)—made the list for the first time at No. 16. Libya (No. 13) and Nigeria (No. 14) remain very high.

Each year the Open Doors WWL ranks the 50 worst countries in which to practice Christianity. This year the complete methodology of the Open Doors WWL is published for the first time. It was independently audited by the International Institute for Religious Freedom to help make the information gathering and calculation process more transparent.

Open Doors is an international ministry that has been supporting and strengthening persecuted Christians around the world for almost 60 years.

“The 2014 WWL is the most comprehensive study of the systematic persecution of Christians ever done. Often completely unaddressed in the West is the fact that Christians are the largest persecuted minority in the world,” says Open Doors USA President and CEO David Curry.

He continues, “Countries on the WWL, such as North Korea, Saudi Arabia and throughout the Middle East and North Africa are targeting Christians—imprisoning, punishing and even in some cases murdering people who choose to express privately or publicly their Christian faith. The 2014 WWL is a wake-up call to Americans to become more aware of these atrocities and restrictions on religious freedom.”

North Korea Remains Horrific Place for Christians

In no other country in the world are Christians so fiercely persecuted because of their faith than in North Korea. Like others in that country, Christians have to survive under one of the most oppressive regimes in contemporary times. They have to deal with corrupt officials, bad policies, natural disasters, diseases and hunger.

On top of that, they must hide their decision to follow Christ. Being caught with a Bible is grounds for execution or a lifelong political prison sentence. An estimated 50,000 to 70,000 Christians live in concentration camps, prisons and prison-like circumstances under the regime of leader Kim Jong

Un.

Somalia's First No. 2 Position

For the first time in the history of the Open Doors WWL, a sub-Saharan African country—Somalia—is ranked No. 2. Although the capital of Mogadishu is under more moderate Muslim government control, surveillance is conducted to root out converts from Islam, and the church has to remain secret. Large parts of the country remain ungovernable, and retreating al-Shabab rebels vent their anger by imposing an even more restrictive form of Shariah law.

As one Christian told an Open Doors researcher, “In Somalia, a Christian cannot trust anyone. One false confidence, and you literally lose your head.”

Increasing Islamic Extremism in Syria

Syria is the least surprising newcomer to the top 10, though it is one of the WWL's highest risers, at No. 3, up from No. 11. The civil war continues to rage, perplexing an international community anxious to intervene but seeing no viable opportunity.

Atrocities against the Christian community, perpetrated especially by foreign-supported jihadi groups, run at their highest level since the war began almost three years ago. Syria had more martyrs (1,213) than any country on the WWL. Nigeria followed with 612 martyrs, then Pakistan with 88, Egypt with 83, Angola with 16, Niger with 15, Iraq with 11, the CAR nine and Colombia with eight.

There is evidence these fighters are destabilizing neighboring countries, such as Iraq (No. 4) and even relatively peaceful Jordan (No. 26).

“Polarization is increasing across the Middle East, and Islam is becoming even more radicalized with the civil war in Syria,

giving the jihadists a new impetus," says a WWL persecution analyst for the area.

Pakistan Makes Major Jump to No. 8

Pakistan saw its worst act of persecution ever against Christians on Sept. 22, when 89 Christians were killed by two suicide bombers outside All Saints Church in Peshawar. But the country rises to No. 8 on the WWL also because the anti-Christian pressure in Pakistani society is also increasing.

The country is simply the world's most extremist-infested state. An election during the reporting period often saw prominent political candidates openly court Taliban groups, emboldening them to increase the pressure on the substantial yet beleaguered Christian minority.

Central African Republic a New Hot Spot

In the last year, the most gruesome headlines have been dominated by the little-known Central African Republic. Horrific violence often directed at Christians by the Seleka rebel alliance has catapulted the nation of 4.5 million to No. 16 on the WWL. The country has been torn apart by warlords and especially foreign mercenaries from Chad and Sudan who target Christians for rape, robbery and murder.

Like Mali last year, the CAR shows how rapidly a seemingly stable state can disintegrate and a Christian minority or even majority can come to the brink of extinction. Even after foreign intervention to chase away the Muslim extremists, Christians in northern Mali still fear returning to their homes. Mali remains on the list at No. 33 after being No. 7 in 2013.

Colombia and Sri Lanka Also Higher on List

Two other countries rose significantly higher on the list. Colombia enters the top 30 for the first time at No. 25 as

levels of kidnappings and assassinations remain high in rebel-held areas. Sri Lanka is another newcomer to the WWL (No. 29) after a significant rise in anti-Christian violence (more than 50 attacks on churches last year alone) powered by a strident Buddhist nationalist movement and higher pressure on Christians from local communities and monks.

World Watch List Methodology Independently Audited

The Open Doors World Watch List is the only annual survey of religious liberty conditions of Christians around the world. It measures the degree of freedom Christians have to live out their faith in five spheres of life—private, family, community, national and church life—plus a sixth sphere measuring the degree of violence. The methodology counts each sphere equally and is designed specifically to track the deep structures of persecution and not merely incidents.

Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, head of strategy and research for Open Doors International, says, “It is our intent through the WWL to encourage more people and organizations to carefully study the needs and stories of persecuted Christians, and as a result deepen the passion to pray for them.

“The WWL is more than a set of numbers. It must also be seen as a human document, reflecting millions of sad but also amazing stories of strong faith.”