

Pressure on Christians Grew in 2013

More than ever, some of the hardest places for Christians to live are fragile or failed states where militant Islamist movements flourish, according to an annual report on Christian religious freedom.

Pressure on Christians intensified worldwide in 2013, according to Open Doors International, a charity that provides support to Christians who are harassed, jailed or attacked because of their faith. The situation deteriorated most rapidly across northern Africa, the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, in countries where Open Doors says sectarian violence has advanced unchecked by impotent central governments.

The findings are contained in the 2014 World Watch List, released Jan. 8 by Open Doors. The list ranks the 50 countries the charity considers to be most hostile to believers during the 12-month period ending Oct. 31.

Since 2003, the No. 1 spot has been held by North Korea, where exposed Christians face long prison terms or execution. For most of the world's Christians, however, the more comprehensive story is revealed down the list.

Failed States

Among the top 10 on the list are six countries where Open Doors says "the government has little or no control": Syria, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen. Of those six, four are ranked as high, or higher, than in the 2013 World Watch List.

Syria is No. 3, up from No. 11 a year ago. The continuing civil war has afflicted all segments of society, but Christians have paid an especially high price, often at the

hands of imported jihadists. In October, Islamist militias killed 46 Christians in Sadad.

Pakistan, at No. 8, does little to control local politicians who provide room for anti-Christian pressure to grow, Open Doors says. In October, two suicide bombers killed 96 Christians at a church in Peshawar, believed to be the worst single act of anti-Christian violence since Pakistan was created in 1947.

Not even on the list a year ago, the Central African Republic now sits at No. 16, having spiraled into anarchy since the March overthrow of the government by an Islamist-dominated rebel coalition. In the months since, rebel attacks on Christian villages have killed thousands and driven up to 1 million people from their homes. The United Nations in December ordered an expanded force of African Union and French soldiers into lawless CAR to restore security.

Islamic Extremism

Of the top 10 countries on the list, all but North Korea are majority Muslim. Continuing a 15-year trend, militant Islam is a growing source of pressure on Christians, Open Doors says, and has become the primary driver of persecution in 36 of the 50 countries on the list.

The result is especially violent in sub-Saharan Africa. Four sub-Saharan countries rank among the 10 most-violent countries for Christians in 2013: Central African Republic, Nigeria, Eritrea and Sudan.

Though somewhat less violent than those four countries, No. 2 Somalia is the first sub-Saharan nation to rank at the top of the World Watch List—or as high on the list as is possible, given North Korea's perennial No. 1 position. Somalia is largely governed by militia-backed clans, not a central government, and prominent Islamic leaders regularly proclaim there is no place for Christians in the country.

“In this country, a Christian cannot trust anyone,” Open Doors quoted a Somali Christian in its report. “One false confidence and you literally lose your head.”

Rising on the List

Beyond Africa and the Middle East, several Asian countries climbed the list. In India, which rose from No. 31 in 2013 to No. 28 in the current list, the Hindu nationalist movement behind the Bharatiya Janata Party broadened its reach.

Two Asian countries not included on the 2013 list are included in 2014: Sri Lanka ranked No. 29, due largely to increased violence and the emergence of a Buddhist extremist movement that has targeted Christians and Muslims. Bangladesh is No. 48, primarily because of a new Islamic extremist group demanding the imposition of shariah, or Islamic law.

No country rose further on the World Watch List than Colombia, which ranked 46th a year ago and is No. 25 on the current list. Open Doors says the higher ranking is due partly to improving research methods, and partly to a greater number of reports of violence toward Christians in 2013.

A common source of violence is the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, which has become more involved in the drug trade and has attacked Christians who oppose the illegal activity, according to Open Doors.

Methodology

The World Watch List is the only annual global survey of Christian religious freedom, Open Doors says. It measures freedom in five areas of life: private; family; community; national; the church; and also the degree of violence.

For the first time, the methodology behind the annual list has been audited by an outside group: the International Institute for Religious Freedom, a network of academics around the world that seeks “reliable data on the violation of religious freedom worldwide.” Open Doors said it sought the audit “to

make the information-gathering and calculation process transparent.”

The Good News

Overall, the 2014 list determines that pressure on Christians increased in 34 countries, decreased in five, and remained about the same in the remaining 14. The total is greater than 50 because three countries—Azerbaijan, Uganda and Kyrgyzstan—that were included in the 2013 list dropped off the list in 2014.

If the numbers tell a sobering story, they also help to drive a more positive narrative, said Brian Grim, senior researcher and director of cross-national data for the Religion & Public Life Project at the Pew Research Center, in Washington, D.C.

“Reports like the World Watch List, and those we produce at Pew Research Center, stimulate discussion and action among groups such as the United Nations, the European Parliament and the U.S. Congress,” Grim told World Watch Monitor via email. “In 2011 alone, the sources used in the latest Pew Research study reported that 76 percent of countries had government or societal initiatives to reduce religious restrictions or hostilities.”