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Open Doors: Christian persecution up 14% worldwide



The number of Christians suffering high to extremely high persecution is 14 percent more in 2019, Open Doors reported, counting 245 million individuals globally.

Persecution driven by Islamic extremism and Communist authoritarianism in the world's two most populous countries, India and China, marked the increase, Open Doors said today (Jan. 16) in releasing its 2019 World Watch List of the 50 countries with the most extreme Christian persecution.
"Islamic radicalism continues to dominate and influence all spheres of life for Christians, and we are watching China and India very closely," Open Doors USA President and CEO David Curry said in releasing the latest findings. "The distressing impact of billions of people living in an environment in which the government oppresses freedom of religion is unraveling day by day as millions of Christians are being attacked, imprisoned or killed."

Life without religious freedom is no freedom at all, Curry said at a Washington press conference announcing the findings.

“Religious freedom is the first freedom,” he said. “If you don’t have the right to make up your own mind, are you really free at all?”

China climbed to 27th on the list from 43rd in 2018. India ranked as the 10th most persecuted country this year, its first time in the top 10 in the rankings’ 27-year history. India outpaces China in persecution, despite the rampant closure of house churches and the widespread arrest of Christians.

“India has a large population of Christians,” Curry said, “and the radical agenda of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata) Party has created an environment — and I can’t repeat this enough because it needs to be understood — that India’s not a safe place for Christians. Because the government has looked the other way when mobs have attacked churches, and then they have tacitly approved the arrest of pastors. Christians of all kinds are under pressure in India.”

North Korea, an authoritarian regime mandating worship of President Kim Jong-un, maintains its first place for the 18th consecutive year. Others in the top 10, in descending order are Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, Pakistan, Sudan, Eritrea, Yemen and Iran.

Russia, which had not placed in the top 50 countries of persecution since 2011, entered the 2019 list at No. 41.

Globally, persecution against women and the spread of radical Islam across sub-Saharan Africa join authoritarianism as notable trends driving persecution. Africa is a major epicenter of violence against Christians, with groups loyal to the Islamic State growing in sub-Saharan Africa. Open Doors noted a splinter group of Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province, or ISWAP.

Numerically, the 245 million persecuted Christians counted this year are more than the 215 million counted in 2018. Globally, one in nine Christians is highly persecuted — an increase from one in 12 last year. Each day of 2018, 11 Christians were killed, totaling 4,136 by year’s end. Most of the killings — 3,731 — were in Nigeria, which ranks 12th on the list, Open Doors said. Pakistan and the Central African Republic round out the three countries where Christians experience the most physical violence.

“Open Doors continues to see ominous persecution trends against Christians,”

Curry said. “Open Doors will continue to walk alongside these Christians and advocate on their behalf for human rights we take for granted in America.”

Among few improvements for Christians in 2019, Iraq ranked number 13 this year after an eighth-place spot in 2018, evidence of the territorial defeat of ISIS. Malaysia improved from 23rd to 42nd, where the electoral victory of the Pakatan Harapan political coalition has reportedly given hope to persecuted minorities. North Korea, despite its first-place rank, freed three imprisoned Korean American Christians in 2018, including a pastor convicted erroneously as a spy.

Open Doors markets its list as the “only comprehensive, annual survey of the state of religious liberty for Christians around the world.”

Interviews and research conducted November 2017 through October 2018 measures Christians’ ability to practice faith in five spheres of life, namely private, family, community, national and church. Each category is measured with numerical points, with the total score determining a country’s ranking.

For instance, North Korea garnered 94 out of 100 points, with India accumulating 83.

Ranking 11-50 on the list are, in descending order, Syria, Nigeria, Iraq, Maldives, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Uzbekistan, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Central African Republic, Algeria, Turkmenistan, Mali, Mauritania, Turkey, China, Ethiopia, Tajikistan, Indonesia, Jordan, Nepal, Bhutan, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Brunei, Tunisia, Qatar, Mexico, Kenya, Russian Federation, Malaysia, Kuwait, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Bangladesh, the Palestinian Territories and Azerbaijan.

The full list and accompanying resources are available at opendoorsusa.org. Open Doors has worked for more than 60 years to help Christians living in countries the organization deems the world’s most oppressive and restrictive for believers.