# *Persecuted and Forgotten?*

## A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2011-2013



*Aid to the Church in Need*

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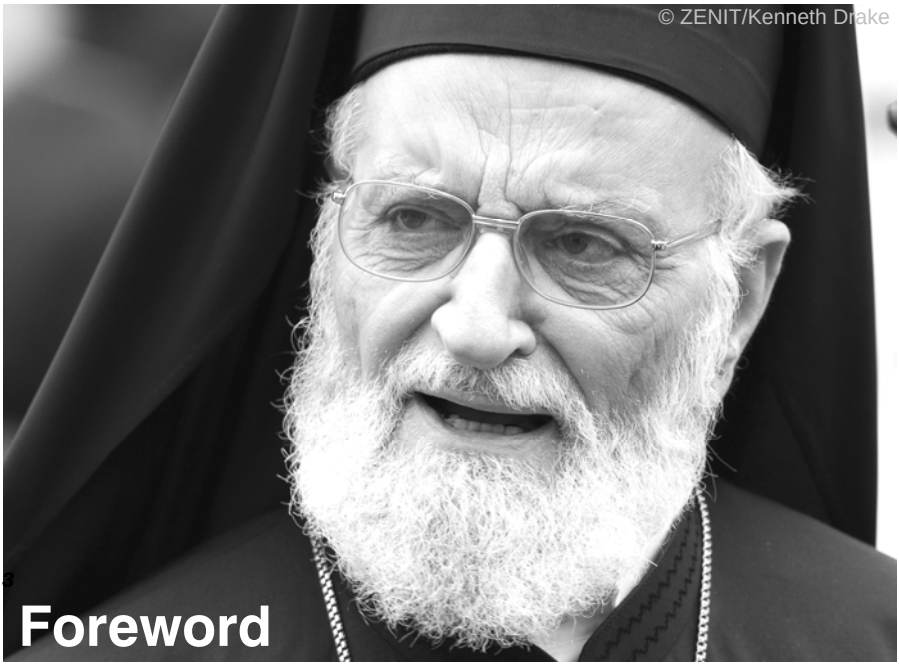



# Foreword

## by Patriarch Gregorios III

**Head of the Melkite Greek-Catholic Church**

I am writing this letter in Damascus where we have been experiencing a harsh, bloody, painful and long Way of the Cross that has stretched down every road in Syria. All Syrians have been living this Way of the Cross for more than two years now.

As Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Saviour, fell under the weight of the Holy Cross, Simon of Cyrene was fetched to help. We too need a Simon to help bear our cross. Most of all, we need Jesus to bring to an end without delay our harsh Way of the Cross, enabling us to reach the joyful goal of the Resurrection.

“If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross.” (Matthew 27. 40) With these words, Jesus was mocked as he hung on the Cross, close to death. He suffered to bring all the children of God together, and to bring new life to a broken world.

Through his love for a broken world, Christ is on the Cross still, sharing in the pain that the people of God undergo. In all the countries around the world where Christians suffer for their faith, Our Lord is persecuted too – as he revealed to St Paul on the road to Damascus.

This attitude of the suffering Christ shows us the way we Christians must go in this situation of crisis in Syria.

We call for dialogue, reconciliation and mutual respect for and among parties and for the crisis to be resolved by peaceful means.

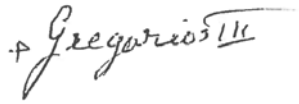
In Damascus today and indeed across Syria, I can testify to the suffering of Christians and so many others, who, in a spiritual sense, share in Christ's crucifixion.

Until 2011, Syria was a sanctuary for Christians escaping persecution in Iraq. Our country was a beacon of hope for Christianity in the Middle East. Now, quite suddenly, those Iraqi Christians who came to our country have fled once more.

This is why I am grateful to Aid to the Church in Need for *Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith.* It is essential that we know the facts and figures of persecution, in so far as they can be established. Equally we need to inquire into the causes of the suffering; we should seek to understand something of the complex mix of issues confronting Christians, living as a little flock surrounded by great difficulties.

The meaning of the presence, role and mission of this little flock – even in the harsh situation in the Arab world, where Jesus, the Gospel and Christianity were born – is being with and for the big flock, "that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly". (John 10. 10)

Fear not, little flock! Live with courage and be light in the darkness of these days.



Patriarch of Antioch and All the East
Of Alexandria and of Jerusalem

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# Executive summary

## Introduction – Christianity, persecution and exodus

"Our people are very afraid. We were expecting trouble but nothing to this degree of brutality."

With emotion evident in his voice, Bishop Kyrillos William of Assiut, Egypt talks to staff at Aid to the Church in Need the morning after a spate of violence against Christians concentrated within less than 48 hours. He said that nearly 80 churches and other Coptic centres including convents, Church-run schools and clinics had been attacked all across the country. He explained that fear of attack meant that thousands of Christians were too afraid to leave their homes. "Many Christians are suffering," he said. "From some villages, we hear appeals from people saying 'Save us; we cannot go out of our houses' ".[1]

Shocked by the scale of the attacks, we at ACN asked the bishop to explain why the Church had borne the brunt of the violence. He said: "The attackers thought that Christians were to blame for their problems. We were being punished – scapegoated."

The events of 14–15th August 2013 that Bishop Kyrillos described demonstrate the primary purpose of this report, the 2013 edition of *Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith.* The full report, which is available at www.acnuk.org/persecution, shows that Christians have fallen victim to widespread and intense acts of violence motivated in part at least by religious hatred. Furthermore, in the period under review, 2011–2013, evidence both first and second-hand suggests that the violence and intimidation in question is now more serious than in preceding years. Taken as a whole, the oppression raises grave questions about the long-term survival of Christianity in regions where until recently the Church has been both numerous in terms of faithful, and active in terms of the part it has played in public life. Yet, even a cursory glance at the various flashpoints around the world within the past three years makes clear that Christians most certainly have not always been the primary target of attack, nor indeed that a religious agenda has clearly stood above and beyond all other motives driving aggressors. People of all faiths and none have suffered during a period of revolution, civil war and international upheaval that both encompasses the Arab Spring and extends far beyond it.

A close comparison of the impact of the violence on the various religious communities concerned points to two key forces of change: firstly that as large and well-established communities, often with a long history, Christians are disproportionately vulnerable to attack, and secondly that their reaction has been to flee regions of conflict with little prospect of returning, at least in the short-term. Nor indeed are these twin problems – vulnerability and exodus – passing phenomena. Already well established for years, decades and in some cases centuries, they have become so pronounced that it would take far more than simply a change of government to win back the confidence that has been so comprehensively crushed. Christianity may yet remain the largest world religion, but its claims to universality – a truly global presence on all five continents – may soon be lost as it becomes the prime victim in the emergence of theocratic states where minority faith groups – most especially Christians – have no place, except perhaps as third-class citizens.

## Global perspectives: 75 percent of persecution is against Christians

If this prognosis sounds ominous, the start of the reporting period – spring 2011 – began on a distinctly unpromising note. Even before the Arab Spring began, an event which was to have devastating consequences for Christianity, leading human rights researchers and commentators declared something long suspected but not yet proven – that is until now: that Christianity is the world's most persecuted religion. In October 2010, a report issued by the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE) concluded that at least 75 per cent of all religious persecution was directed against Christians. It released findings showing that about 100 million Christians experienced some sort of discrimination, oppression or persecution.[2] If COMECE's report was met with scepticism in some quarters, subsequent events have provided ample proof of the scale of the threat against the Church and hence in November 2012 German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared before a synod of the country's Lutheran Church that: "Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world."[3] What has changed since the last edition of *Persecuted and Forgotten?* released in March 2011, is that notions about the severity of Christian persecution have come to be accepted by the media at large. Leading news and other media organisations have taken up the story of Christian persecution as never before. They have done so despite being accused by some, including the religious journalist Rupert

Shortt, of being in denial about the problem because of misplaced embarrassment about 19th century colonial powers evangelising 'the natives' in far-flung places.[4]

## Research methodology – reaching the heart of the matter

Building on such research pointing to the scale of human rights violations against Christians, the 2013 edition of *Persecuted and Forgotten?* considers the situation facing oppressed Church members in 30 countries where the problem is particularly severe, or has been until recently. Selective rather than comprehensive, the reports for each country under review are broken down into two parts. First, there is an analysis of the key facts and figures which form the essential background to any assessment of religious freedom. This overview of political (constitutional), economic and cultural phenomena provides the foundation for an assessment of the all-important indicators of change and continuity which are the ultimate focal point of the report. This country analysis is, in each case, followed by incident reports. Varying considerably in detail and quantity, these reports provide noteworthy persecution case studies. The criteria for inclusion include any individual or group suffering harassment, oppression or worse in ways that impact upon their access to religious freedom. Incident reports cover all mainstream Christian groups – Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. *Persecuted and Forgotten?* avoids coverage of religious groups who, though nominally Christian, either excessively focus on materialism by preaching a "Prosperity Gospel", or whose concept of the Christian faith is divorced from mainstream beliefs.

It is important to state at this point that the majority of incident reports are provided by sources other than ACN; indeed the charity must acknowledge a debt of gratitude to other Christian charities and to media organisations both religious (mostly Christian) and secular. The cause of religious freedom is much enhanced by their commitment to reporting about Christian persecution – sometimes provided in the teeth of opposition, either from a state anxious to avoid bad publicity or from intolerant forces within the country in question who again do not want to attract adverse attention. The authors of *Persecuted and Forgotten?* have paid close attention to selecting only reputable sources and where possible have corroborated their evidence against specialist knowledge by country experts within the charity and from material collected on ACN fact-finding trips to countries where persecution is most serious. In many of the countries under review, specific, sensitive information has been

withheld for the precise reason that it is deemed to put Christians – and others – at direct risk. Hence some of the conclusions drawn go further than indicated by the evidence. While determined to uphold the principle of "speaking truth to power", the report has had to weigh the responsibilities due to the very people Aid to the Church in Need is committed to helping.

This careful and thorough-going research, building on methods developed over four editions of *Persecuted and Forgotten?* spanning six years, shows that the situation has deteriorated in the overwhelming majority of the countries under review. Even in the period since the last full report was produced, in March 2011, there has been a worsening – in most cases a severe one – in a majority of cases.

Analysing the research findings in the 30 countries in question, ACN compared religious freedom issues facing Christians at the end of the period under review with those experienced two years earlier and before. Foremost among the issues considered was the preponderance of anti-Christian violence, notably attacks on churches and Christians' homes and businesses, as well as kidnapping of faithful for reasons connected to their faith or religious identity. Linked to this are court cases involving Christians suffering persecution – the number of cases, the nature of the (alleged) offences, and the outcome of the court's deliberations. This is particularly relevant concerning Blasphemy accusations. Another key issue has been political developments hindering or advancing the cause of Christians' access to religious freedom, notably new or amended constitutions, government statements and policies touching on key issues – travel permits for clergy, planning regulations regarding church building projects, government attitudes to Christian engagement in political debate and voting rights. A fourth but by no means lesser concern has been efforts to track social changes affecting Christians. Examples under this category include access to employment, education and healthcare, where social stigmatisation has had a habit of making it impossible for Christians to claim their rights in spite of entitlement under the law. Taken as a whole, however, the evaluation cannot be considered comprehensive, for reasons of dearth of evidence. Also state oppression is entirely different by nature to sporadic acts of violence – and conditions of persecution are invariably not uniform across any one particular country. Indeed, ACN's essentially quantitative assessment, by its very nature, does not provide statistics to facilitate a comparative analysis. Consequently, qualitative analyses by other religious freedom research organisations, respected for

their work in this field, have been drawn upon in order to provide a broader picture.

## Persecuted and Forgotten? – the principal findings

It is in this context that *Persecuted and Forgotten?* concludes that there has been a clear and in some cases dramatic deterioration in most of the countries of greatest concern. In only four of the countries under review had the situation improved – and of these, the improvement was marginal in three cases. In eight other countries no substantial changes were reported – in many cases because the situation was already so bad, it could scarcely get any worse. Important though these findings are, by far the most significant conclusion of the 2013 edition of *Persecuted and Forgotten?* is that in 20 of the 30 countries under review the situation for Christians had worsened. Of these, only in seven cases was the deterioration 'slight', meaning that in the majority, Christians had suffered such a severe decline in their fortunes that many now lived in fear of their safety, were under pressure to leave or change their religion, or at least were at a distinct economic and social disadvantage on account of their beliefs. In most of the countries concerned, this change for the worse comes on top of deteriorations marked in the 2011 *Persecuted and Forgotten?* report and shows that in spite of efforts to raise publicity about the plight of Christians, material steps to counter the problems have yet to bear fruit of any great significance.

Although a comparative analysis of the number of countries worldwide in which Christians face persecution is illuminating in its own right, it is a geographical breakdown that has most to say about the dominant issues concerning oppression of Christians.

## Middle East – Arab Spring, Christian Winter

Of greatest concern is the Middle East. Here, the Arab Spring has placed unparalleled pressures on ancient Christian communities whose capacity to weather storms of violence and institutionalised discrimination has been tested to a degree not seen in modern times. Here the dominant factor has been the exodus of Christians in response to violence, economic disadvantage and cultural changes. The mass migration of faithful was also directly related to individual acts – and in some cases longer spells – of outright persecution. This included bombing of churches, physical

attacks on Christians' homes and shops, kidnapping (especially of women and in some cases, clergy), as well as public statements in the media and by militant groups, specifically aimed against Christians. An upsurge in anti-Christian violence and intimidation was one factor, perhaps even the dominant one, in a mass movement of Christians. After 2002, Iraq's Christian population quickly halved as people emigrated *en masse* in response to the ongoing sectarian conflict. The latest statistics show that Iraqi Christians still number at least 300,000, boosted in part by refugees returning from bomb-blasted Syria. That said, in spring 2013, Raphael I Sako, the new Chaldean Patriarch of Baghdad, specifically warned his faithful of the dire consequences of continued Christian emigration. Speaking at his installation Mass, he told his congregation: "If emigration continues, God forbid, there will be no more Christians in the Middle East. [The Church] will be no more than a distant memory."[5] A country whose Christian population stood at 1.4 million – larger than the number of practising Christians in Britain – now stood on the verge of descent into obscurity.

The threat that now applies to Iraq is at risk of happening in other Middle East countries which until now have also had a sizeable and vocal Christian community. This is the impact of the Arab Spring. Syria, so recently the country of choice for Iraqi Christians seeking sanctuary, has now become the nightmare that the refugees thought they had left behind. Exact statistics of the exodus from Syria are hard to find, as is only inevitable in a country in a state of protracted flux, but what has emerged is that the number of Christians leaving Syria is disproportionately high compared to other faith groups. Entire populations of predominantly Christian towns and villages around Homs suddenly fled for their lives in early 2012. Violence against Christians was a factor hard to ignore in the widespread violence that swept Syria. The grotesque murder of popular priest Father Fadi Haddad of Qatana near Damascus in October 2012 was followed in April 2013 by the kidnapping of two Archbishops from Aleppo, Boulos Yazigi and Yohanna Ibrahim. As the months dragged on with no news, fears increased that the prelates were dead. But it was not just the hierarchy who suffered. ACN met Syrian Christian refugees in Jordan who reported being told: "Don't celebrate Easter or you will be killed like your Christ."[6] By the summer of 2013, Syrian refugees were thought to have topped two million,[7] a significant proportion of them Christians. Those willing to give their story described a desperation to seek a new life in the West.

The focus of attention having switched from Iraq to Syria – both with decimated Christian communities – the spotlight then settled on Egypt. Already disenfranchised by the Islamist agenda of President Mohammed Morsi, a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Christians' hopes of a fresh start after his July 2013 fall from power were soon dashed. Violence against the country's Coptic Christians in August 2013 saw nearly 80 churches and other Church establishments attacked in the single-biggest blow to the Middle East's largest Christian community, standing at about 10 million. Already, 200,000 Christians had left the country since the fall of President Mubarak in February 2011. Many more are sure to leave and those who remain are likely to struggle to play a meaningful role in the development of a country whose future hangs in the balance.

Christians in the Middle East are suffering from a domino effect of violence, which began in Iraq, spread to Syria and now overshadows Egypt, leaving the survival of the Church in jeopardy. Christians want out, and an end to the presence of the Church in its ancient heartlands is no longer a remote possibility but a very real and pressing threat. These circumstances apply both to countries with a (formerly) large Christian community and to those such as Yemen, where the faithful are few in number.

## Militant Islamism – an inter-continental threat

Many of the problems faced by Christians in the Middle East are similar in nature and extent elsewhere in the world: the common link in many cases is militant Islamism. The period in question has seen an unprecedented upsurge in fundamentalist Islam, which specifically seeks to eradicate the presence of Christianity wherever the faith is to be found. Attacks from Islamists which were few and far between are now commonplace and Christians are paying with their lives. Community after community has suffered, attracting comparatively minimal international media coverage.

While militant Islamism has had huge impact in the Middle East, the problems it has created for Christians are to be seen in the context of broader issues, notably an upsurge of general instability, a breakdown of law and order and poverty caused at least in part by forced displacement. In broad terms the same applies to many parts of Africa. Here the specific threat to Christians posed by Islamism is brought into sharp relief as a result of it emerging as part of a mix of problems – political, economic and social. The most obvious case of this is Nigeria. In April 2011, the Christian Association of Nigeria reported that 430 churches were attacked in

violence associated with the Presidential elections that brought Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the south, to power. 65,000 people were forced from their homes and 800 people lay dead. The violence continued thereafter, targeting not only Christians but also security structures, government buildings, markets and even Muslim communities. Christians, especially in the north, were terrorised by attacks on churches packed with faithful that took place almost every Sunday. The perpetrators of the violence, militant group Boko Haram (which means "Western Education is Forbidden"), declared what they described as "a war on Christians". A Boko Haram spokesman said: "We will create so much effort to end the Christian presence in our push to have a proper Islamic state that the Christians won't be able to stay." In Boko Haram's home region of north-east Nigeria, the Church was crushed. By the summer of 2013 it was reported that half of the churches in the 37-parish Diocese of Maiduguri had been damaged or destroyed within one year. Research for the year to October 2012 showed that, of the 1,201 Christians killed for their faith worldwide, 791 were from Nigeria. But Nigeria was by no means alone.

The 2013 *Persecuted and Forgotten?* report shows the impact of militant Islam in African countries including Sudan where a sudden upsurge in extremism cannot be reported because of the potential impact of such coverage on Christians living there. One leading Sudanese cleric reported that the problems of the 2012–13 period were in certain respects worse than during the height of the notorious 1983–2005 civil war. Then there is Tanzania, where armed Islamists have fired on churches and priests in the island of Zanzibar in a cycle of violence that only made the headlines when suspected Islamists threw acid on two British 18-year-old girls caught singing during Ramadan. Elsewhere, fundamentalist Islam was a problem in the Maldives, that popular holiday destination in the Asian sub-continent. Space in *Persecuted and Forgotten?* did not allow for coverage of Islamist attacks in the land-locked Central African Republic. There, in July 2013, less than six months after seizing power in a coup, fundamentalist militia group Séléka mounted attacks on 14 Christian villages, leaving 15 dead and rendering nearly 1,000 homeless. It brought back memories of Islamist fighters in Mali, who in 2012 mounted one of the most ferocious attacks by fundamentalist Muslims in modern times. By August of that year, leading Church sources reported that 200,000 Christians from northern Mali had fled the Islamist-controlled region for neighbouring Algeria. Few parts of Africa were now free from the threat of militant Islamist movements, whose objective was pan-continental domination and whose primary targets of religious hatred were Christians. The militancy witnessed to unprecedented levels in these countries suggested that the Church in

Africa could soon be retreating from the position of sustained growth it has enjoyed for so many decades. The violence shows the continent to be as much at risk as parts of the Asian sub-continent, which have a long history of militant, fundamentalist Islam, notably Pakistan and Afghanistan. There, continuing violence and intimidation by extremists, educated in indoctrinating madrassa Islamic schools, are continuing to demean Christians with trumped-up charges of blasphemy, which in turn quickly lead to violence affecting entire Christian communities. The dramatic spread of militant Islamism, especially since the early 1970s, now represents perhaps the most significant threat to religious freedom worldwide.

Armed, trained, highly motivated and with hugely sophisticated communications systems, such militant Islamist groups are clearly able to tap into significant financial resources, and searching questions need to be asked about where such funding comes from and how strategies can be developed to reduce it. But there is also a countervailing point of huge significance; the experience of ACN's project partners and those of other charities and faith organisations is that in spite of vigorous efforts to radicalise many communities where Islam is predominant or in the ascendant, many – if not most – local people remain resistant to extremism and want to live in peace and prosperity with their neighbours. This is evidenced by the Muslims who in the summer of 2013 stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Egypt's Christians and repulsed advancing extremist mobs bent on destroying churches as well as Christians' homes and businesses.

## Majority religions targeting minorities

Whenever religion is seen as part of a homogeneous national identity, then all adherents of other faiths are regarded as foreign and seen as threatening the norm. In both Sri Lanka and Burma, attempts to impose the majority faith, Buddhism, by attacks on those who practise other creeds is a defining feature of religious intolerance in these countries, and in both cases religion and ethnicity are seen as entwined to a greater or lesser degree. Following the civil war in Sri Lanka, there has been resurgence of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, which sees Sri Lankan identity interlinked with Sinhalese ethnicity and Theravada Buddhist culture. This has led to a rise in violent attacks on Christians and other religious minorities. January to May 2013 saw at least 45 incidents of persecution against Christians, compared to only 52 throughout the whole of 2012. Despite significant political reforms in Burma throughout 2011 and

2012, the ongoing repression of religio-ethnic groups continues in the northern tribal areas. Where the military is trying to bring these areas under control by force, troops are reportedly pressuring inhabitants to convert to Buddhism. "When the Burma army come to the villages, they torch the churches but don't touch the pagodas. They want us to be Burman, to be Buddhist, and to follow their orders," said Hkanhpa Sadan, Joint Secretary of the Kachin National Organisation.[8] Meanwhile in India numerous problems faced by Christians are linked to the prominence of Hindutva political parties, such as the Bharatiya Janata Party, in local government in Karnataka and Orissa**.** Hindutva is a right-wing form of Hindu nationalism, which – broadly speaking – regards India as a Hindu country which should not tolerate other religions or cultures. In some states, the government has been found to be complicit in violence against Christians perpetrated by Hindutva radicals, including facial mutilation, destruction of churches, Bibles, crucifixes, cars and other transport as well as desecration of graves.

## Communism versus Christianity – a continuing crisis

Despite all the growing problems posed by militant Islamism and other forms of religious extremism, it is not the issue of concern in the country where persecution of Christians is at its worst, namely North Korea. In this highly secretive state, hermetically sealed from the outside world, formal religious activity remains virtually nil and what little occurs is highly monitored. Investigations by Human Rights Watch and the United Nations found that people caught praying – especially if it involved foreign organisations – were likely to be executed. In a country of 24 million, with an estimated Christian population of 500,000, there are only four (recognised) churches in the country – one Catholic, one Orthodox and two Protestant. A change of leader during the time under review – Kim Jong-un replacing Kim Jong-Il – has done nothing to alleviate the situation and if anything has made things worse. The case of North Korea highlights the extent to which Christians continue to suffer grievously under Communist or pseudo-Communist regimes. Of particular concern was China where, in a concerted effort to force faith communities to co-operate with the authorities, the regime toughened up its response to non-compliance. Many faith groups suffered, notably Christians. According to research by a leading US Christian human rights organisation, there were more than 130 cases of persecution in 2012 involving nearly 5,000 people – up more than 40 percent on the previous year.[9] Reports indicated a significant increase in government interference in the religious life of

Catholic communities – both Official (recognised by the state) and Underground (lacking government sanction). Priests and religious have been forced to undergo 're-education' programmes – seminars on government religion policy. To a degree not seen before, government-recognised Protestant communities had land and buildings seized by provincial officials. In the case of house churches, the government has forced Christians to either come under state control or face being closed down. Determined to refuse tight controls, including submission of lists of Church members, many communities have defied government orders and have suffered the consequences, which include arrest. Other countries with a communist background have continued to impose grave hardships on Christians, most notably Vietnam. There, in January 2013, a new law (Decree 92) increased government control over religious groups.

## Socialist states – Signs of hope and signs of hopelessness

But in a number of other communist states, the situation has improved. In Laos, fewer Christians were jailed and those who were received shorter prison sentences. Provincial authorities in at least some areas have tried to protect groups of persecuted Christians when village elders and other officials have oppressed them. In Cuba, the Catholic Church reported significant progress in relations with Raul Castro's regime. In part, these were linked to Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the island in March 2012, when nationwide religious celebrations went ahead with full government cooperation. All this built on the achievements of a similar trip to Cuba by the now Blessed John Paul II. Other developments, including the return of church buildings confiscated by the regime 50 years previously, took place independently of Benedict XVI's visit and exhibited a pattern of Church-state reconciliation whereby Catholic leaders played a key mediating role between the regime and certain disaffected groups. But problems remained, with some Christian communities, notably Protestant ones, reporting continued government censure.

Concerning former Marxist or communist countries, restrictions linger on from a previous era. In Belarus, faith groups continue to require state permission to carry out religious activities, notably permission to celebrate public services – and Christian groups not registered with the state have had their property seized, and/or are fined for participating in unauthorised worship. In Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and some neighbouring countries, the state monitors and scrutinises all activities. Religious publications are strictly regulated and banned material can be seized. In November 2012,

in the Tashkent region of Uzbekistan, a Protestant was fined 100 times the monthly wage for distributing religious literature – the official who produced the "expert analyses" used in the case allegedly succeeded in reading 1,300 books, 2,100 brochures, 450 leaflets, 50 magazines as well as watching 200 videos and listening to 350 audio cassettes – all within one working day. In Eritrea, where the current ruling party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice is the direct successor to the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, a Marxist group, the persecution of Christians was stepped up in the first five months of 2013 with at least 191 Christians being arrested for practising their faith. Reports indicate Eritrea to be one of the worst countries for persecuting Christians. Information gleaned from the country describes how religious prisoners – whose crime is usually nothing more than trying to worship and pray freely – suffer torture including being forced to walk barefoot on sharp rocks and thorns for an hour each day. Christians were also beaten with rods to extract confessions and told they would be killed if they did not recant their faith. It is estimated that up to 3,000 Christians remain imprisoned for their beliefs.

## Conclusion – religious freedom "the litmus test" of human rights

For the Catholic Church, religious liberty is the cornerstone of freedom as a whole, or as Pope John Paul II called it "the litmus test for the respect of all other human rights".[10] In January 2011, at the start of the period under review, Pope Benedict XVI highlighted the issue, stating that religious freedom "cannot be denied without at the same time encroaching on all fundamental rights and freedoms, since it is their synthesis and keystone".[11] Hence *Persecuted and Forgotten?* is not only relevant to Christians, nor indeed just to people of faith, but it has something to say to everybody who cares about freedom. And so it is of seminal importance to conclude by underlining the report's key finding, namely that persecution of Christians has – even within the last three years – worsened in most of the countries where the problem is most severe. While there has been some progress in certain Communist or leftist countries such as Cuba and Laos, on balance Christians are the victims of increased violence and oppression, in many cases to a degree unthinkable a generation ago. In other communist and former communist countries, most notably China, a renewed clampdown on Christians has turned the clock back on prospects for religious freedom.

Significant though this may be, it is the Arab Spring that has been the most important development. A movement that started out with much promise for the advance of democracy has proved disastrous for Christians, whose very presence in some parts of the Middle East now hangs by a thread. A domino effect of anti-Christian persecution and turbulence is now clearly visible, starting in Iraq, moving to Syria and now spreading to Egypt – three Middle East countries which have had sizeable and influential Christian communities. Now, the Christian population has suffered a rapid decline as a sea-change in political attitudes takes place, favouring a theocratic system. Taken as a whole, with the possible exception of Jordan, no Middle East country has over the past three years seen anything other than a decline in the fortunes of Christians. But the problems have spread far beyond the Arab Spring, with militant Islamism representing a major threat, especially in Africa but also in key regions of the Asian sub-continent. There Christianity is persecuted as never before.

As a Catholic charity committed to helping Christians who suffer for their faith, Aid to the Church in Need is determined to do everything possible to help. Practical help of a pastoral nature is the charity's core objective, supporting priests, Sisters and faithful to proclaim the Gospel and promote Christian values – especially through faith formation. In a time of increasing humanitarian crisis, especially in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, ACN is offering food, medicine and other help. But aid is one thing, combating ignorance and misinformation is quite another. Time and again, the bishops and other project partners with whom the charity works in more than 130 countries worldwide, call on the charity to do more to raise awareness around the world about the plight of Christians who suffer. In an ever faster-moving world, they are increasingly aware of the need to grab what few opportunities they have to speak out for their persecuted people. It is this which compelled Bishop Kyrillos to speak to ACN about the attacks of August 2013 which did so much damage to churches and other Christian centres across Egypt. Information has a value in and of itself. But it also serves a purpose, a point not lost on senior clergy, who repeatedly call for prayers of solidarity with their suffering people. Describing how police saved him by intervening just as Islamists were breaking through his front door, Coptic Catholic Bishop Joannes Zakaria of Luxor urged ACN to keep in touch, at least so that others might know the witness of faith shown by those willing to give their lives for their beliefs. *Persecuted and Forgotten?* pays tribute to the courage and faith of people like Bishop Joannes, who concluded his message to ACN by sharing his vision for inter-faith harmony that remains as vivid as ever in spite of the current hardship and pain. He wrote: "We are happy to be suffering and to be

victims and to lose our churches and our homes and our livelihood to save Egypt for the Christians and the Muslims. We need the prayers of everybody to solve our problems. It is the future that we are concerned about so that people [of all faiths] can live alongside each other."

# Afghanistan

| Population | Religions | Christian Population |
|---|---|---|
| 29.1 million | Muslim 99.9%<br>Other 0.1% | Less than 5,000[12] |

Afghanistan's one remaining public church was destroyed in March 2010. The church's disappearance gives an indication of the extent of the problems experienced by the country's small Christian community whose religious faith and practice is a closely guarded secret, all the more so if any one of them is a convert. Apostasy is deemed a "crime" punishable by death in a country which follows a "restrictive interpretation" of Islamic *Shari'a* law.[13] *Shari'a* continues to be practised in accordance with the 2004 Constitution which recognises Islamic law in cases not explicitly addressed in the country's penal code.

The international community placed great emphasis on the constitution, which was introduced in the years that followed the overthrow of the 1996–2001 Taliban extremist regime. Commentators noted the document's language guaranteeing women's rights and its espousal of charters, not least the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, the constitution's contradictions were immediately apparent; Article two espouses religious freedom for all faiths while Article three implicitly defers to *Shari'a* by stating that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam." In practice, any hopes that President Karzai's regime would promote religious freedom were soon dashed. In December 2011, he dismissed three of the nine commissioners acting for the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, the country's leading body responsible for monitoring civil liberties in the country.

And the signs are that human rights monitoring is sorely needed in Afghanistan, where organisations investigating persecution of religious minorities described a sudden increase in arrests of Christians who are sometimes jailed for apostasy. The government is advised on legal and religious matters by the Ulema Council of Kabul which includes hard-line Sunni Muslim scholars and imams noted for their intolerance to Islamic practices not in accordance with their notions of orthodoxy.

By 2011, President Karzai was implementing the council's request that *Shari'a* be enforced nationwide. The previous year he mounted what was

termed a "convert hunt" after an Afghan television channel broadcast images of people being baptised. Christians were already fearful after the international outcry sparked by the case of Afghan convert Abdul Rahman, who was tried for converting to Christianity and was eventually released and granted refugee status in Italy after worldwide protests.

If the outlook for Christians was bleak under Karzai, they were a lot worse in particular parts of the country still effectively under the Taliban, which to all intents and purposes governed a "virtual parallel state".[14] The Taliban mounted a campaign against aid workers from Christian organisations accusing them of Christian proslytism under the guise of social work. In many cases, the Christians were left with no option but to flee the country. Not that Christians were alone in facing acute risks. Reports emerged that in August 2012, 15 men and two women were beheaded by the Taliban for dancing at a party. Fellow Muslims were also under fire with bomb attacks carried out on two dissident mosques in Taliban-controlled areas. Many years after international military forces stepped in to wrest Afghanistan from extremist control, religious freedom seems almost as distant a prospect as ever. For the time being at least, secrecy remains many minorities' watchword and life for ordinary Christians in Afghanistan remains unknown to the West.

January 2011: A Christian in Afghanistan, who remained anonymous for security reasons, described how religious freedom had not improved in the 10 years since the fall of the Taliban. Fearing his Christian faith could land him in prison or worse, the 22-year-old man said: "I used to carry my Bible everywhere – I don't any more." He added: "I don't want to call myself Christian; people would think I'm immoral. If I'm arrested, I would never say I'm a Christian. If you admit it, you [cannot stay in] the country."[15]

February 2011: Said Musa was released from prison after an appeal from the international community led by the media. Mr Musa, who was held for six months in Kabul, was suspected of having converted from Islam to Christianity, a crime punishable by death according to *Shari'a* Islamic law. He was one of 20 people arrested in a "convert hunt" carried out by President Karzai in response to outrage expressed by influential Islamists incensed by a local television network's May 2010 broadcast of local people undergoing baptism.[16]

April 2011: Shahib Assadullah was released six months after being arrested and charged with "proselytising". It was alleged that he had given a Bible to a friend.[17]

May 2011: Seven Afghan families who converted to Christianity escaped to India, fearing execution in their native country.[18]

June 2011: The brutal execution of Abdul Latif, an Afghan Muslim from the Heart area who had converted to Christianity, has been held up by extremists as "an example". A video posted online shows four Taliban beheading the Christian man before a camera as a warning to any Afghan who might want to follow the religion of "the infidel".[19]

August 2011: Siegbert Stocker and Willi Ehret, two Christian humanitarian workers in Afghanistan were abducted, probably by the Taliban. [20]

September 2012: Reports of the growth of Christianity in Afghanistan, apparently supported by Muslim clerics, have prompted government ministers to crack down on proseltyism. It follows a May 2011 statement made in the Afghan Parliament by the Interior Minister Mohammad Hanif Atmar. "There are evidences of Christian evangelism in the country," he said. "The activities in this field might be broad."[21]

June 2013: A report reconfirmed that there were no known churches in Afghanistan despite the country having an indigenous Christian population running into thousands, with some reports giving a more precise figure of 5,000. The report compared the lack of provision of Christian places of worship with those for Muslims in a country with an estimated 48,000 mosques.[22]

# Belarus

| Population | Religions | Christian Pop. |
|---|---|---|
| 9.5 million [23] | Christian 74%<br>Non-religious 25%<br>Other 1% | 7 million |

The state continues to impose restrictions on Orthodox faithful, Catholics, Lutherans, Jews and Muslims, even though these faith groups are officially recognised. A 2002 religion law acknowledges the historic role of the Orthodox Church in the development of the Belarusian people and recognises the others as "traditional faiths". In spite of this, approved faith groups operate knowing that religious activity of any kind can only go ahead with state permission. Clergy from abroad wanting to minister in Belarus face administrative obstacles, especially concerning residence permits, and all evangelisation activities are tightly controlled. There is a ban on religious activity in private homes, other than smaller than average dwellings, and places of worship must be state-approved.[24] Catholic priests have described how clergy require state permission to celebrate public services. If a priest wants to cover Mass for a priest in another parish he must obtain formal permission. While it is permitted for a priest to celebrate Mass in a private room on his own, he may not do so with a congregation. In each city there is an individual nominated by the Council of Ministers called the Official for Ideology, Culture and Youth who is responsible for overseeing all religious rights and activities.

With Orthodox faithful making up nearly two-thirds of Belarus' population and Catholics at least another 10 percent, most Christians in the country are state recognised. For the comparative few who are not, state restrictions are severe. Unrecognised Christian groups may find their meetings raided, their property seized, or their members fined for unauthorised religious activities. Government pressure was applied to associations and minority religious groups which refused to comply with various forms of registration and provide personal data such as fingerprints. In November 2011, Filipp Kirdun, a young Baptist from the New Life Church, was arrested and sentenced for refusing to provide such data. In Grodno two new communities have been refused state registration despite church members submitting a petition. In early 2012 a total of 3,210 local faith communities had state registration. Of these, 1,567 were Orthodox as well as 33 Old Believer communities (who broke away from the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century in protest over liturgical

reforms), 972 were Protestant, 494 were Catholic, 53 were Jewish, 27 were Jehovah's Witness, 23 were Muslim, and 41 were from a variety of other faiths.[25]

Property remains a controversial issue. Although about 95 percent of historical Orthodox churches have been returned, Lutheran and Calvinist Christians have achieved little success. Permits for the construction of new churches are difficult to acquire. Additionally the state wants to transform a number of places of worship into hotels or museums, including the 17th century baroque Bernardine monastery in Minsk and the attached Church of St Joseph.

March 2011: Svetlana Starovoitova, appointed as an 'Ideology Official', joined KGB officers in raiding a Baptist Church. The official insisted that "the authorities have the right to interrupt services" of unregistered communities .The remarks came after two Baptist congregations were raided. The pastor of one is awaiting trial for "holding an unauthorised religious service" and three members of the other congregation were officially warned that if they continue to worship without state registration they could face criminal prosecution and two years in prison.[26]

July 2011: Grodno-based journalist Andrzej Poczobut, on trial for slandering Belarus' president, was denied a visit from a priest in the months that followed his arrest in April. His wife, Aksana Poczobut, said: "He is a true Roman Catholic and all this time in detention he has asked for a priest more than once, but the prison administration always found excuses not to grant it." Catholic prison chaplain Fr Kazimir Zylis said he had been waiting for permission from the Prosecutor's Office to visit Poczobut. Earlier in the year Pavel Severinets, the Co-Chair of the country's Christian Democracy movement, was not allowed to see an Orthodox priest during the five months he spent in prison.[27]

August-September 2011: Baptist Pastor Aleksei Abramovich was fined several times the average weekly wage in late September for leading unregistered religious worship, following a raid on his home during a service on 14th August. The church in Zhodino is not registered. The Church of God, an independent Protestant church in Zhodino, gave up trying to gain state registration after architecture officials repeatedly refused to sign off their newly-built church as complete.[28]

February 2012: In Gomel, a Baptist Sunday service held in a private apartment was interrupted and audio and video material was confiscated. The owner was fined for organising an "unauthorised prayer meeting".

November-December 2012: New Life Church, a 1,000-strong charismatic Pentecostal congregation in Minsk, received a new eviction order as part of a crackdown following the appointment of Valery Vakulchyk as the new chief of the KGB's secret police. The Christians have been fighting since 2002 to keep control of their property, a renovated cow barn on the edge of the city, which the authorities claim cannot have its use changed into a church. But authorities cancelled the eviction order on 5th December. New Life's administrator Vitaly Antonchikov told Forum 18: "This isn't the end, of course – the eviction is cancelled, but legally our land and building still belong to the authorities."[29]

June 2013: Three Baptist leaders in Gomel received fines after their churches were raided – the first such raids and fines in almost a year. Pastor Nikolai Varushin was fined the equivalent of a month's average local wages. Pastor Pyotr Yashchenko and Valentin Shchedrenok were fined much smaller amounts.[30]

# Bosnia-Herzegovina

| Population | Religions | Christian Pop. |
|---|---|---|
| 3.8 million | Muslim 55%<br>Christian 41%<br>Other 4% | 1.5 million |

There continue to be reports of discrimination and intolerance against Christians in the country – but the line separating religious and ethnic identity is often blurred, and ethnic factors may be behind at least some of the problems. Ethnic cleansing during the 1992–95 war caused vast numbers to be displaced and led to the population being segregated into separate areas. Bosnia-Herzegovina is comprised of two essentially autonomous states: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska. The majority of Serbian Orthodox live in the Republic of Srpska, and the majority of Muslims and Catholics reside in the Federation – with most Catholics living in Herzegovina and most Muslims living in central Bosnia. Protestants and other minority religious groups tend to cluster in larger cities, such as Sarajevo, Banja Luka and Mostar.

Minority religious leaders continue to report discrimination by local government officials. The Baptist community was unable to register the Alliance of Protestant-Evangelical Churches in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Justice Ministry stated that the problem is that the law does not formally recognise the term “alliance”. Discrimination against Catholics in Srpska was denounced by Cardinal Vinko Puljic, the Archbishop of Sarajevo. He said that despite pledges from the international community, many Croatian Catholics are still unable to return to the predominantly Serbian areas. As of 2012, more than 200,000 of them were still waiting to go home. Catholics living in Bosnia and Herzegovina are also victims of rising Islamic radicalism, particularly the growth of the Saudi Arabian Wahhabist movement, which, according to Cardinal Puljic, is trying to drive the Catholics out of the country. Noting that “Catholics are systematically disadvantaged”, he demanded equal treatment for Catholics in employment, education and other spheres of life.[31]

While dozens of mosques have been built in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia-Herezgovina, no building permissions were granted for churches. Authorities have refused to return hundreds of nationalised church buildings, most notably the Minor Seminary building in Travnik, despite a ruling from the European Court of Human Rights. The Serbian Orthodox

Church continues to demand the return of numerous buildings, including one currently occupied by the faculty of Economics and Business of Sarajevo University. In 2010 a deal was struck involving the Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the City of Sarajevo and the university which would haved move the school to a new site and returned the building to the Church. The agreement proposed completing both parts of the plan before the end of the year but no progress has yet been reported. Similar problems are faced by Catholics. Cardinal Puljic said that the government "has no interest in giving the Catholic Church back its property".[32]

September 2011: 50 Serbian Orthodox Christians tried to enter a church, which the authorities had closed, to celebrate the Divine Liturgy. A fight with Bosniak Muslims followed. The church was illegally built in Konjevic Polje in 1996 on land owned by Bosniak woman, Fata Orlovic. The church was built during the war when Ms Orlovic was absent from the village. A 2004 court ruling ordered the building's demolition, and in 2007, Serbian Orthodox officials agreed, in principle, to relocate the church.

January 2012: Sister Ivanka Mihaljevic, Provincial Superior of the Franciscan Sisters of Christ the King, said members of the congregation wearing habits are increasingly subjected to verbal abuse when they go out in public. She cited a recent example of a shopkeeper refusing to sell them bread: "Although the loaves were in plain sight, the proprietor claimed he was out of bread. But he simply did not want to sell it to a Catholic nun." According to Sister Ivanka, the problem is Muslim extremists who came to fight on the side of their fellow believers but remained in the country after the war. "Again and again, we are made to feel unwelcome, even though this is our home." She emphasised that native Bosnian Muslims are "peaceable," and are often ashamed of the behaviour of their extremist co-religionists.[33]

October 2012: Christians are leaving post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina following increasing discrimination and Islamisation, according to a report released by Aid to the Church in Need's office in Holland. The report estimated there are just 440,000 Catholics left in the Balkan nation. During an ACN-sponsored visit to EU bodies in Brussels, Cardinal Puljic said: "Time is running out as there is a worrisome rise in radicalism."[34]

# Burma

| Population | Religions | Christian Pop. |
|---|---|---|
| 50 million [35] | Buddhist 80%<br>Local religions 7%<br>Christian 6%<br>Muslim 3.5%, Others 3.5% | 3 million |

Despite significant political reforms in Burma throughout 2011 and 2012, life has changed little for religious minorities living in the tribal areas of the north – including Christians. Christianity is the predominant religion among ethnic Kachin, Chin, and Naga peoples and is also widespread among the Karen and Karenni.[36] During British rule these ethnic areas were administered separately, but they were incorporated into Burma after the 1947 Panglong Agreement, which gave them full autonomy, a share of the national wealth and the right to secession. However, following the assassination of General Aung San, who negotiated the agreement, and several members of his cabinet later that year, subsequent governments refused to honour the agreement.[37] Many of these areas are effectively under local control rather than the Burmese government. For example, the Kachin Independence Organisation controls most of Kachin State, running schools and hospitals and other social services. But in June 2011 the army ended a 17-year-long ceasefire and government troops were heavily deployed in the region in an attempt to bring it under government control.[38] There was an aerial bombardment of civilian targets in December 2012. The USCIRF noted "serious abuses against mainly Christian civilians during military interventions in Kachin State". The army are accused of targeting Christians for forced labour, torture and rape in Kachin State and other areas where they are fighting.[39]

The ongoing repression of ethnic groups in Burma has religious elements to it. One priest, originally from Shan State, said Christianity is "still perceived as a foreign religion"[40] and, according to one report, persecution against Christians (in Chin State) is part of a widespread campaign addressed at creating a "uniform" society in which "the only religion professed is Buddhism".[41] Testifying to the religious element of the ongoing military campaign to bring the tribal areas of the north under control of the national government, Hkanhpa Sadan, Joint Secretary of the Kachin National Organisation, said, "When the Burma army come to the villages, they torch the churches but don't touch the pagodas. They want us to be Burman, to be Buddhist, and to follow their orders."[42] There

appears to be a programme of aggressive conversion of Christians. In Chin State, families have been encouraged to convert to Buddhism. There have been financial and other incentives including exemption from forced labour – although incidents of this nature have declined over the period under examination – and Burmese Buddhist soldiers were offered financial and career incentives for marrying and converting Chin Christian women.[43] But it is not just Christians who are targeted; the most extreme religious persecution in the period under examination has been against the Rohingya Muslim minority in Rakhine state. It is estimated that since June 2012 more than 5,000 Rohingyas have been killed.[44]

Catholic Priests in the country have said that while "people are freer" under the government that was elected in November 2010, Christians continue to experience discrimination in their everyday lives. One prelate reported "problems" obtaining permits to build a church, while Christians experience religious discrimination "also in the workplace, especially when looking for jobs within the public administrations". A priest from Yagon said: "Officials always find some invented excuse to ensure one does not get a job."[45]The government also continues to prohibit the importing of Bibles and other religious books.

October 2011: Mass-goers at a Catholic Church in Nam San Yang village, Bhamo District – including women and the elderly – were fired on by more than 100 soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion 438. During the incident on the 16th October, parishioners sought shelter from the bullet fire behind the altar in the Lady Chapel. The soldiers beat up the assistant priest, 49-year-old Father Jan Ma Aung Li, and detained him, with four other worshippers, asking them where local insurgents stored guns and bombs. When the five detainees said they did not know as they were not insurgents, the soldiers kicked them and beat them with rifle butts. The Catholics were led away and forced to carry heavy rucksacks. When the soldiers and their captives stopped to rest at a Baptist church, members of the military set fire to the minister's house. Eventually the captives were released, but upon reaching their village, they found their houses ablaze.[46]

October 2011: Burmese authorities issued an order requiring all churches in Phakant Township, Kachin State to present a written request a full 15 days before public religious events such as Bible studies, catechism classes and prayer meetings. [47]In most ethnic minority areas, Christians are required to obtain a permit for any gathering of more than five people, other than Sunday services.[48]

November 2011: At least 10 people were killed and 25 or more injured during a grenade attack at an orphanage in Myitkyinar, Kachin State.[49]

December 2011: Soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion 142 burned the cook house belonging to the Baptist church in Dingga village, Bhamo District. The church building was saved in the incident on 16th December, but the fire spread to five nearby homes causing substantial damage.[50]

December 2011: Government soldiers killed 47-year-old Christian Maran Zau Ja on Christmas Day. Mr Ja, a farmer, was returning from his sugar cane fields with a friend when troops opened fire on them. His friend survived. Neither had any links to insurgents.[51]

January 2012: Burmese troops fired mortars at Mawwan Kachin Baptist Church in Hpakant town.[52]

February 2012: More than 1,100 new refugees – including 450 Christians – arrived at Thailand's seven camps set up for those fleeing Burma. This "shows there were clashes between the troops and Karen soldiers after the January's peace agreement", said Saw Tu, head of the Karen Refugee Committee. This adds to the 74,000 registered and 53,000 unregistered refugees already in the camps.[53]

March 2012: Burmese soldiers disrupted a church meeting attended by up to 1,000 people belonging to the Evangelical Church in Matupi, Chin State. The military detachment, led by two captains, ordered those present to show permits for the meeting. Among those present was local elected official Pu Cin Van. One of the officers put a gun to his head, saying: "I do not care if you are a member of parliament; here we are not under the authority of government, we only take orders from the Regional North-Western Command."[54]

January 2013: The Burmese army appeared to have indiscriminately shelled the town of Laiza, Kachin State according to Human Rights Watch. During the incident on the 14th January the army fired several 105mm howitzer shells into the town at about 8.30am and 10.30pm. The first bombardment killed three civilians: an elderly Christian pastor, a 46-year-old displaced man, and a 14-year-old boy. Several others were wounded.[55]

March 2013: A report claimed government troops destroyed 66 churches in Kachin State. The study by the Kachin Women's Association of Thailand also claimed the military raped at least 64 civilians in the period following the collapse of Kachin's 2011 ceasefire.[56]

March 2013: The United Nations was allowed to provide humanitarian aid to displaced people in Kachin state numbering perhaps more than 100,000.

April 2013: The European Union announced the lifting of all remaining economic sanctions against Burma despite regular incidents of violent discrimination against religious minorities.[57]

June 2013: Two men were shot dead by the Burmese Army in Northern Shan State on Friday 14th – just weeks after a 30th May agreement by the Burmese government and the Kachin Independence Organisation to "undertake efforts to achieve de-escalation and cessation of hostilities". Zahkung Lum Hkawng, aged 45, was acting as a watchman for his village, Nawng Hen, when Burmese troops demanded that the village head provide them with a guide. Mr Hkawng was made to accompany the soldiers to Mung Ya Hka Zup village where they clashed with the Kachin Independence Army. Accusing Lum Hkawng of deliberately leading them into an ambush, Burmese Army soldiers beat and tortured Mr Hkawng before shooting him dead. The same day, an unnamed villager was killed by the Burmese Army at the road between Nan Gat and Ying La villages.[58]

# China

| Population | Religions | Christian Pop. |
|---|---|---|
| 1.3 billion | Atheist 40%<br>Chinese religions 35%<br>Buddhist 12%, Christian 5%<br>Muslim 2%, Other 6% | 65 million |

Responding to US reports indicating a marked deterioration in religious freedom, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said: "The Chinese people are best qualified to judge China's religious situation."[59] But it seems the Chinese people would not judge the situation positively – with 132 persecution cases in 2012 involving 4,919 people, an increase of 41.9 percent from 2011.[60] For the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, there are "systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom" – with certain religious and spiritual groups being banned completely.[61] However, despite such problems, religious communities continue to grow in China.[62]

Protestantism and Catholicism are recognised religions, but followers are supposed to practise under the auspices of one of the state-sanctioned 'patriotic associations'. For Catholics this means the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) and for Protestants the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. These seek to control Christianity in line with Communist Party principles. But many worship outside of these official structures in what are often referred to as the 'Underground' churches. In the case of the Catholic Church, many 'Official' Church communities are loyal to Rome. An estimated 90 percent of state-approved bishops and priests are recognised by the Vatican.[63] While the regime does not technically outlaw the 'Underground' churches, they are not permitted to hold public religious services or carry out other activities.[64]

While there have been positive developments – with government officials praising religious groups as a "positive force" for their social and charitable contributions[65] – nevertheless the government continues to expand its control over religious activities. Unregistered Protestant communities have continued to be raided and have their activities monitored or disrupted. Up to 1,500 Protestants were detained in 2012.[66] Activities against house churches have been stepped up, with an intense investigation of these groups in early 2012 being the first stage in a plan to bring them under the Three-Self Patriotic Movement or eradicate them within 10 years.[67] In August 2012, three churches in Dongguan, Guangdong Province were

shut by authorities after they refused to come under its auspices.[68] The vast majority of house church leaders are reported to be opposed to government oversight of their religious teachings or theology – particularly controversial is the idea of "theological reconstruction", which purges elements of Christianity which the Communist Party regards as incompatible with its policies. Some groups have been prevented from registering by the Religious Affairs Office, but even registration does not protect congregations; worshippers belonging to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement found their property impounded or destroyed. Restrictions on religious practice are enforced at a provincial level and are open to local interpretation, hence vastly different situations are experienced by 'Underground' and 'Official' Church communities across China's provinces. Chinese officials have used the letter of the law and the language of human rights – citing purported security concerns – to justify repressing religious communities.[69]

At the beginning of 2012, Archbishop Savio Hon Tai-fai, Vatican Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, appealed for the release of three bishops and six priests who had disappeared in police custody or were imprisoned without trial: "We need to pray for these bishops and priests... but we must also appeal to those who are holding them".[70] Arrests and detention have continued throughout the period covered by this report and in March 2012 'Underground' co-adjutor Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin of Wenzhou and his chancellor Fr Paul Jiang Sunian were taken and forced to attend re-education classes.[71] Bishop Joseph Wu Qinjing of Zhouzhi, central Shaanxi province, lives under house arrest in the Xi'an diocesan minor seminary.[72] Sources told AsiaNews that every week dozens of "Underground" priests are taken and forced to attend a week of lectures on the government's religious policy.[73] After relations began to improve between 'Official' and 'Underground' Catholics following Benedict XVI's Letter to Chinese Catholics (27th May 2007), the CPA retaliated with numerous initiatives to bring 'Official' bishops back in line. 'Official' bishops are no longer allowed to meet each another without CPA representatives being present, and in several cases have had to undergo weeks, sometimes months, of seminars on Communist religious policy.

February 2011: Over 100 riot police officers and 80 "hired roughnecks" raided a house where more than 20 Christians were meeting in Yangdang

Town, Zaoyang City, Hubei Province. During the incident in the evening of 23rd February, officers destroyed video cameras, audio recorders, mobile phones, and any other equipment that was capable of capturing the raid, which was led by Fu Dewu, Head of Xiangyang Municipal Bureau for Ethnic and Religious Affairs and Li Guiming, Director of Zaoyang Municipal Bureau of Religion. Officers smashed the door open and broke into the house without presenting any legal documents or going through any legally required procedures. They then proceeded to use tear gas on the group before beating them and taking them to the local police station. Authorities claimed the Christians had established "a site for religious activities… without approval".[74]

March 2011: Security forces prevented Catholics in Hebei from attending the funeral of 95-year-old Bishop Andrew Hao Jinli of Xiwanzi following his death on Ash Wednesday.[75]

April 2011: 'Underground' priest Fr Chen Hailong was seized on 9th April and tortured in order to force him to join the 'Official' Church. He was finally released on 5th August, having spent long periods in which he was denied food. He was subsequently sentenced to two years of "re-education through labour". According to sources in Xuanhua and Xiwanzi Dioceses, over the past two decades at least 20 'Underground' priests have been tortured to make them join the CPA. One of those priests was Fr Peter Zhang Guangjun, who was also repeatedly beaten after being seized for a second time on 8th March. The first time he was seized was on 13th January and he was released from custody the following month. Reports said he was physically and verbally abused and denied sleep for five consecutive days.[76]

May 2011: Yang Caizhen, one of 10 house church members sentenced to terms in jail and a labour camp in Shanxi province was set free on medical parole on 27th after she nearly died in detention. Mrs Caizhen, whose husband was one of the senior leaders of the Linfen Church network, was transferred in February from a prison hospital to a local hospital. A chest x-ray and blood test results revealed she was in poor health including a high fever and liver inflammation. The church leaders were arrested for organizing a prayer rally on 14th September 2009, the day after 400 police officers and others raided the unregistered church's site, seriously wounding 30 Christians and destroying church buildings.[77]

June 2011: Pastor Shi Enhao, Deputy Chairman of the Chinese House Church Alliance and pastor of Suqian Church, was seized and later sentenced to two years' re-education through labour for "holding illegal

meetings and organising illegal venues for religious meetings". He was sentenced without trial in August 2011, which is legal for sentences involving re-education through labour.[78]

July 2011: Eight bishops loyal to the Holy See were forced by to ordain CPA-approved Fr Huang Bingzhang as the new Bishop of Shantou. A source said: "All of them were accompanied by the police to the place of the event. The majority of the bishops refused and resisted to go." The Vatican later confirmed Fr Bingzhang's *latae sentiae* excommunication (ie he was excommunicated in the act of accepting Episcopal ordination without papal approval).[79]

July 2011: Authorities arrested 19 members of Shouwang Church in Beijing who continued to meet outdoors after they were evicted from their meeting place in April 2011. All but two of those arrested were released by midnight, and one was released the following day. Some church members have lost their homes or jobs and others have been subjected to verbal abuse because of their faith.[80]

August 2011: Security officials detained a number of 'Underground' Catholic Church leaders as well as several other priests and dozens of lay leaders from Tianshui diocese in north-western Gansu province. Among the more than 30 people seized were Diocesan Administrator Fr John Baptist Wang Ruohan and retired Bishop Casmir Wang Milu. After being taken, they were forced to attend study sessions for four hours a day. An official with the local government's Religious Affairs Bureau said the men were merely taking part in a routine training session. The actions appeared to be aimed at persuading those seized to support the CPA candidate for the bishop's see in Tianshui. They were released at the end of the month.[81]

August 2011: Fr Wang Chengli, Diocesan Administrator of the Underground community in Heze Diocese (Caozhou), Shandong province, was sentenced to two years of "re-education through labour". Local Catholics claimed his arrest was connected with his refusal to join the CPA.[82]

September 2011: Five leaders of Linfen church were also released from labour camps after serving two years. It was reported that Fao Fuqin, Zhao Guoai, Yang Caizhen, Yang Hongzhen and Li Shuangpin all experienced physical and psychological torment since being imprisoned in September 2009.[83]

October 2011: In the Tibetan capital of Lhasa, 11 house church leaders were detained "on suspicion of [being part of a] cult group" and held for nearly a month before being released. While Church leader Song Xinkuan was in detention, police officers blasphemed and insulted his faith and repeatedly beat him. Authorities also confiscated religious materials and two laptops, which were described as tools for his criminal activities.[84]

November 2011: A formal legal appeal was lodged to stop the demolition of a church in Shandong Province built by Anglican missionaries in 1886. It was scheduled to be knocked down despite belonging to the government's Three-Self Patriotic Movement and being designated a protected national historical landmark in 1994. A demolition crew started work in November 2010, after developers were given permission by local authorities. Church members organised a round-the-clock protest.[85]

December 2011/January 2012: 'Underground' Bishop John Wang Ruowang of Tianshui, 50, who was secretly ordained with a papal mandate last year, was seized from Taijing Church on 30th December and taken by officials to a guesthouse in Tianshui city in northern Gansu province. In January 2012 he was been forced to attend "education and conversion classes" along with a number of his priests.[86]

January 2012: Jenny Chen, a Canadian businesswoman of Chinese extraction, was arrested and tortured by Tianjin State security agents. She was denied food or water for two days and required hospitalisation after her treatment. She was seized after she visited Rev Jin Tianming, the leader of Shouwang Church, who is currently under house arrest, and went to house church services in Shanxi Province. She had been an eyewitness to armed police surrounding Jindeng Church to stop members from attending a Christmas day service.[87]

March 2012: Police and government officials, including members of the religious affairs bureau, raided a Christian bookstore in Taiyuan, the capital of Shanxi Province, removing all its stock and other items, worth 300,000 yuan (£30,000). At 2pm they took the store's managers for questioning, interrogating them until 1am the following day. The "Grace Like Rain" bookshop had been open for four years and had all the relevant licenses and permissions to operate.[88]

April 2012: The Sisters of Charity in Tianjin Diocese started a public petition protesting against a two-year delay in compensating them for the destruction of their former residence.

April 2012: Two "Underground" Catholic bishops were released. On Easter Sunday, Mgr Peter Shao Zhumin, Coadjutor Bishop of Wenzhou (Zhejiang) and Mgr Peter Jin Lugang Nanyang (Henan) were released, having been held for four weeks and four days respectively. Bishop Lugang was arrested on Maundy Thursday (4th April). His detention prevented him from celebrating the Chrism Mass and any of the Easter Triduum services. Both prelates were advised to join the CPA. Bishop Shao was in favour of collaboration, provided that it was not against "the one, holy, catholic and apostolic" Church.[89]

April 2012: A church in Hefei, the capital of Anhui province, was illegally demolished by government-backed developers. The church decided to cooperate with the city's development plan, which included demolishing the area where the church was located. From April to November 2011, the church was in discussion with the local Communist Party and Xingang Industrial Park about a new site and other related matters, but resettlement arrangements for the church were never finalised. On 24th August the church's electricity was cut off, and four days later the developer began digging a deep trench on the north side of the church. Late on 22nd November, the developers dug another long and deep trench on the south side of the church, cutting of all access to the church. On 27th April, at about 8pm, more than 100 unidentified people arrived at the church and demolished it. Several members of the church's staff, including one Christian woman of over 60, were injured in the process.[90]

April 2012: Zhu Guiqin, a Christian woman living in Fushun City, Liaoning Province, was kidnapped and raped by security personnel hired by the local government. The incident on 11th April took place while she was travelling to Beijing. She reported the incident to the police immediately, but the police in the two cities of Liaoning Fushun and Beijing claimed the other force was responsible. The case has not been formally filed and criminal suspect Xiaohai has not been arrested.[91]

June 2012: A new document demanded that all bishops submit an application form and testimonials to the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China. The two bodies then verify the information and submit it to the State Administration for Religious Affairs. Those who are not in the file will not be able to exercise their ministry. A prelate recognised by the Vatican and the CPA thought the document was a "pretext for more control" and was "counter-productive", adding that such control did not work. The 16-clause document aims at strengthening the power of the CPA.[92]

July 2012: Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin was punished after resigning from his post in the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association at his Episcopal ordination. He told the 1,000-strong congregation that he was stepping down to focus on his pastoral role: "After today's ordination, I would devote every effort to episcopal ministry. It is inconvenient for me to serve the CPA post anymore." Bishop Ma was reportedly being held in Sheshan Regional Seminary following his resignation, where he was undertaking a forced "period of reflection". Both Beijing and the Vatican agreed on the ordination, although the former recognised him as coadjutor while the latter recognised him as auxiliary bishop. In December, CPA authorities stripped Bishop Ma of his ecclesiastical role.[93]

July 2012: Ahead of the episcopal ordination of Fr Joseph Yue Fusheng as Bishop of Harbin without papal mandate, police detained several individuals opposed to the ordination, including several priests and the diocesan administrator. The ordination followed a tense exchange between the Vatican and Beijing. Rome issued a statement telling Chinese authorities that the ordination violated canon law, which automatically excommunicated any prelate taking part. The State Administration for Religious Affairs called the communiqué "outrageous and shocking" and declared that ordinations without Vatican sanction would continue. Five bishops in full communion with Rome took part in the ceremony at the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in Harbin city, Heilongjiang Province. Two Vatican-approved prelates invited to the ceremony – Bishop Joseph Li Shan of Beijing and Bishop Methodius Qu Ailin of Changsha – absented themselves, saying they were ill, but sent their apologies and congratulations. Seven priests in Heilongjiang Province who absented themselves from the ordination, or expressed opposition to it, were ejected from their parishes to "repent for their wrongdoing."[94]

August 2012: CPA Coadjutor Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian of Shanghai announced that the opening of Sheshan Major Seminary and Tailaiqiao Minor Seminary was to be delayed "until further notice" due to the "current situation" without giving further details. It was believed to be connected to Bishop Ma resigning his CPA post, as he was being detained at Sheshan Major Seminary at the time. A Catholic source in China told UCAN, "Sheshan is a regional seminary. It should not be embroiled in the ordination incident."[95]

August 2012: Three staff members of the Houcun house church in Lichuan County, Jiangxi Province, were summoned by the Religious Affairs Bureau and the police. They were told that their church was required to join the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Officials threatened to incarcerate believers

in detention and labour camps if the church continued to meet. The authorities said the names of baptized believers must be submitted as a requirement of joining the TSPM.[96]

September 2012: Caibang village's Catholic Church was burned down. Local Catholics from the village near Hubei's Xiantao City believe the fire was started deliberately and accused local government officials of dragging their feet on the question of investigating the blaze. One Church source said they suspected the officials were protecting someone – as the church was the only building left in the village after developers paid off local residents to move out last year so a new complex of apartments could be built. The developer did not offer compensation to the Church as originally promised, which would have allowed it to relocate to another site. The church had been abandoned since Easter, when authorities cut off water and electricity supplies.[97]

September 2012: Pastor Bike (Zhang Mingxuan), Chairman of China House Church Alliance, and 17 co-workers were arrested by police in Decheng District while distributing Gospel tracts at Dezhou city train station. Police told them to stop "illegal evangelism" and confiscated the remaining materials.[98]

October 2012: All Catholic priests and Sisters in Shanghai Diocese were forced to attend "study classes". About 80 priests and 80 Sisters from Our Lady of the Presentation Congregation took three days' worth of classes at the Shanghai Institute of Socialism. Study sessions lasted 12 hours a day.[99]

December 2012: Provincial Government authorities in Hubei dismissed local Catholic leaders in Wuhan Diocese, replacing them with a government-backed committee, following attempts to reassign priests. Father Joseph Shen Guo'an, a member of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, had been administering diocesan affairs since the last bishop died in 2007, and priests remained in the same parishes after that time. He called a meeting for 19th November which was attended by 19 out of the 23 priests. The meeting drew up a list of assignments and transfers between parishes, which were formally announced by Fr Shen the following day at a solemn mass marking the beginning of the Year of Faith. Despite Hubei Government officials warning them not to implement any changes, on 8th December Fr Shen and others implemented the changes. On the 13th December, 15 priests and several nuns from the diocese were escorted to the office of the provincial Religious Affairs Bureau for a meeting, at which

Fr Shen and Fr Shu Zigeng were dismissed from both their diocesan duties and the CPA. They were replaced by a five-member management committee led by Fr Francis Cui Qingqi, who is said to be close to the government, and including Sister Wu Lin, vice president of national CPA.[100]

December 2012: Nearly 40 officers of Shenzhen's Mobile Training Team descended upon Preacher Cao Nan and eight other Christians, including a 70-year-old woman, who were talking about the Christian concept of Christmas in a park in the southern town of Shenzhe.[101]

January 2013: A land dispute in Leshan city between the local Catholic Church and a local construction company led to two parishioners being hospitalised, including a woman in her 60s, who was admitted in a critical condition. About 100 protesters gathered at the building site on the afternoon of Monday 28th January and the following morning, demanding that the Renshou Sanyou Company paid what it owed to the diocese for the land. A security guard allegedly threw bricks and assaulted several in the crowd, leading to the hospitalisations. Fr Joseph Tong Hengjiu said the construction company agreed to pay by August 2011 but postponed the due date until May 2012 following mediation by the city government. Payment has still not been received, although construction is well advanced. "They will earn hundreds of millions of yuan, but they are unwilling to pay what they owe our diocese," the priest said.[102]

February 2013: ChinaAid's annual report on the situation in China concluded that the situation is deteriorating for the seventh year in a row. The report on the year that has just ended is based on 132 cases of persecution which have involved 4,919 people. The number of individuals tried in court has risen by 125 percent compared to last year; and the rate of persecution according to ChinaAid has increased by 41.9 percent compared to 2011.[103]

March 2013: Government authorities shut a Protestant Church in Shanghai and put the senior pastor, Gao Baoluo, under surveillance. The actions at the end of March followed a month of pressure, including threatening the church's landlord, telling members they would be sacked from their jobs if they continued to attend, and summoning Pastor Baluo's 70-year-old mother to the neighbourhood committee to answer questions about her son.[104]

April 2013: A pastor and 15 lay leaders of a house church based in China's Sichuan Province were taken into police custody. They had been attending a seminar to learn to play musical instruments, and officers confiscated their instruments. Ten were released the following day, but six church

leaders were administratively detained. Pastor Li Min, Wang Yuan and Li Chengxi were given 15-day administrative detention sentences, while three others were given shorter sentences.[105]

April-May 2013: China tightened the rules governing the election and ordination of bishops for the Catholic Church in mainland China. Revised regulations gave the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China – a CPA body which is not recognised by the Holy See – the final decision on Episcopal appointments. Under the regulations, dioceses have to seek permission from the Beijing-based Bishops' Conference and the Bureau for Religious Affairs to begin the process of selecting a new bishop. The revised regulations state that new bishops must support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and its socialist system.[106]

May 2013: Authorities again blocked pilgrims making their way to China's national shrine to the Blessed Virgin Mary in Donglu, Hebei Province. Police surrounded the village, stationing armed guards and blocking roads, in order to stop pilgrims from joining local Catholics in the annual celebration marking an apparition seen in 1900. At least 200 faithful, including women and children, took part in the procession. Red banners calling on locals to "carry out religious activities in a lawful and orderly manner" were displayed throughout the village. More than 30,000 Catholics took part in celebrations in the village in 1995, prompting local authorities to mobilise thousands of troops, arrest priests, and demolish a shrine. Since then police have held the village in lock-down during May. "Tourism is not permitted here," local police officer Guo Lei told AFP reporters, before asking if they were Catholics.[107]

June 2013: 700 pastors and workers from six different churches organised a protest on the north side of the Kaifeng Yellow River Water Conservancy Technical Institute over the local authorities' occupation of land belonging to Kaifeng Christian Church. Although registered with the TSPA, the Kaifeng Christian Church has been unable to reclaim 240 $yd^2$ (200,000 $m^2$) of land taken from the church forty years ago.[108]

July 2013: Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill became the first Christian faith leader to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping. The State Administration for Religious Affairs invited Kirill to visit China. The Chinese Orthodox Church, which was set up by Russian missionaries in the 18$^{th}$ century and granted autonomy in the mid-20$^{th}$ century, is not recognised by the Chinese State. There are only two Shanghai-based elderly priests and 20,000 Chinese Orthodox Christians, but there are signs of resurgence.[109]

August 2013: Four house church members were arrested by Xinjiang Region police on Saturday 31st for running a Sunday school. A week later police had not released the Christians.[110]

September 2013: The Justice and Peace Commission of Hong Kong Diocese asked the UN to assess Beijing's progress in the area of religious freedom. The commission requested that a UN body – the Universal Periodic Review Regarding Religious Freedom in the People's Republic of China from the United Nations – urge Beijing to adhere to the requirements of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as it is a signatory to both. In its submission the commission said, "The Chinese authorities have imposed political and religious policies that have been against the principles and practices of the Catholic faith and have gravely violated human rights." The submission says priests have been placed under surveillance, house arrest, detention, being abducted without trace, confined in hotel rooms, forced to attend classes on Communist Party policy, conferences or religious activities that are contrary to Church teaching, and even tortured.[111]

# Cuba

| Population | Religions | Christian Pop. |
|---|---|---|
| 11.3 million | Christian 70%<br>Atheist 15%<br>Local religions 15% | 7 million |

Pope Benedict XVI's March 2012 trip to Cuba showcased the marked improvement in relations between the Catholic Church and Cuba's communist regime. The fruit of a deepening dialogue between the Cuban bishops and Raul Castro's administration, the three-day visit celebrated meaningful steps towards freedom of Catholic expression to a degree unthinkable a generation before. The trip built on foundations laid by his predecessor, the now Blessed John Paul II, who visited the island in January 1998. Other religious groups also noted a more sympathetic attitude shown them by the regime. But concerns persisted that, behind the scenes, many faithful – especially certain Protestant communities – were subject to restrictions which were just as harsh as in previous years, but perhaps more subtle. The tight government control of many, if not most, aspects of religious life continued to be enforced by the threat of severe penalties. There were persisting concerns about the extent to which the regime was willing to tolerate freedom of expression – not least social conscience – inspired by religious faith.

Well before the plans were initiated for Pope Benedict's visit, the regime took the unprecedented step of agreeing a plan for the statue of Our Lady of Cobre to be taken in procession around towns and villages all over the country. The event, marking the 400th anniversary of devotion to the Patroness of Cuba, was coupled with diocesan-wide pilgrimages to the shrine in Cuba's second city of Santiago de Cuba. In August 2010, a huge Mass celebrating the anniversary was broadcast on national television.[112] High profile Communist Party officials were present. The regime did much to ensure that Benedict XVI's visit was an event of huge national significance. Before John Paul II's visit in 1998, Fidel Castro's regime had granted his request for Christmas Day to be declared a national holiday. In similar vein, Fidel's successor and brother, Raul, granted Pope Benedict's request that the same status be accorded to Good Friday. The idea that 2012 represented a turning-point in the rehabilitation of Catholicism in Cuba came into sharp relief when the ailing Fidel Castro agreed on a last-minute meeting with Benedict XVI. The Church had come a long way since

the most difficult days of the early 1960s, when Fidel Castro declared his to be an atheist regime and confiscated churches, convents and schools and expelled foreign clergy from the island.

Nor were the events of 2011–12 out of step with the general thrust of Church-State relations and indeed reports showed improvements unconnected with Benedict XVI's visit. Well before the Pope came, the regime had openly recognised the Cuban Catholic Church's role as "a bridge" between the state and society concerning specific social and political issues.[113] In July 2010, following talks between Raul Castro and Cardinal Ortega, the regime agreed to free 52 political detainees in the largest prisoner release by the communist authorities for decades. The following March a further eight political prisoners were also set free. By 2013 reports were coming through that the State was returning Church buildings and land taken by the regime more than 50 years previously. Leading clergy stressed that, while the Catholic Church in Cuba was still very poor and in need, it was not persecuted.

But problems related to religious freedom remained. Reports emerged that the regime was detaining so called dissident Christians in their homes and thereby preventing them from attending Benedict XVI's Mass in Havana. And then in July 2012 came the death in suspicious circumstances of Oswaldo Paya, the driving force behind the Varela Project, a pro-democracy movement. The government stated that the driver had lost control of the vehicle but Mr Paya's family said the car had been deliberately run off the road.

Mr Paya was a Catholic and, while in many respects his co-religionists saw significant improvements, the experience of some Protestant groups was very different. In 2013, Christian Solidarity Worldwide reported violent beatings of Protestant ministers in different parts of the country. There was criticism of the Office of Religious Affairs and its efforts to control and monitor religious groups – especially with regard to importing religious books and other materials from abroad and receiving donations from overseas.

March 2011. Eight political prisoners were released; one was part of a group of 75 people arrested in March 2003 during the "Black Spring" – a government crackdown on so-called "dissidents" campaigning for greater freedom as part of the Varela Movement, named after Fr Felix Varela, the Catholic priest and independence campaigner.[114]

June 2011: Church leaders complained that although the government authorised Catholic and Protestant religious services in prisons in 2009, in

a number of cases permission was not granted. In a report produced by Christian Solidarity Worldwide, allegations were made that in particular instances not all prisoners were allowed to attend the services. For non-Christian religious groups, including Afro-Caribbean groups, the situation was reported to be worse, with no provision for them to organise or hold their own services. CSW reported that religious rights were often violated as a form of punishment, with religious literature confiscated and prisoners denied religious visits, particularly in cases of prisoners of conscience.[115]

September 2011: Some members of the Ladies in White were arrested after attending Mass in Santiago to celebrate the feast of Cuba's patron saint, Our Lady of Charity. This followed a pattern of government initiatives aimed at preventing the Ladies from attending church services, a practice particularly evident in the eastern provinces of Holguin and Santiago. On dozens of occasions, the government prevented Ardisnidia Cruz, mother of political prisoners Marcos and Antonio Lima-Cruz, from leaving her house in Holguin on Sundays to attend Mass. In 2013 the Ladies in White again reported acts of intimidation against them.[116]

March 2012: Pope Benedict XVI visited Santiago de Cuba and Havana. Weeks before his arrival, the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN) released a statement that more than 100 dissidents had been arrested. Similarly, during the three days of the Pope's visit, about 200 Cuban critics were banned from attending Masses and other public celebrations. Some were threatened with arrest if they came out of their homes during the Pope's visit and their phone lines were cut off.

April 2012: Good Friday was made a public holiday in Cuba for the first time in 40 years, following the request of Benedict XVI. All religious holidays were cancelled after the 1959 revolution. [117]

July 2012: Oswaldo Paya, leader of the Christian Liberation Movement was killed in a car crash which many described as suspicious. Mr Paya had helped mastermind the Varela Project, a pro-democracy movement which between 2002 and 2004 had collected 25,000 signatures calling for freedom of speech and assembly. He had received the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize and the People in Need's Homo Homini Award. On 22nd July 2012, Paya and fellow activist Harold Cepedo, a Swedish politician, were travelling in a car driven by Angel Carromero, a Spaniard. Paya and Cepedo died when the car crashed near Bayamo, south-east Cuba. The regime stated that the incident was an accident and

that the car had come off the road and crashed into a tree. However, members of Paya's family and one of the car's passengers insisted that the vehicle had been deliberately bumped off the road by another vehicle. Cardinal Jaime Ortega, Archbishop of Havana, presided at Oswaldo Paya's funeral Mass. According to some sources, 50 activists were arrested before and after the ceremony.

January 2013: Authorities in the province of Granma, in south-east Cuba, returned two buildings and land to the Catholic Church. This was in accordance with the policies of President Raul Castro, who had stated his intention to return to the Church property seized by the revolutionary regime in 1961. That same month, local government officials in Santiago de Cuba announced that two churches and a pastoral centre confiscated by the regime decades before would be returned to the Church. Ms Caridad Reitor, Secretary of the Provincial Assembly of the People's Power told Archbishop Dionisio Garcia Ibanez of Santiago de Cuba that they had decided to return the Church of St. Joseph the Worker built in the 1950s, formerly used by the Academy of Sciences, and the Church of St Benedict in Immaculate Conception parish. Further reports described plans for the return of church buildings in Havana.[118]

March 2013: For the second year running, a government decree made Good Friday a public holiday. [119]

April 2013: For the first time in years, Christian Solidarity Worldwide received multiple reports of violent beatings of Protestant pastors in different parts of the country. Additionally, week after week, scores of men, women and sometimes children were physically and violently dragged away by state security agents from Sunday morning services.[120]

April 2013: The Pentecostal pastor of a church in Holguin was left with permanent brain damage after a violent attack while travelling from home to the provincial capital to file a legal complaint against local Communist Party officials who had illegally confiscated his car. Similar attacks against members of Protestant churches have increased in the last year.[121]

# Egypt

| Population | Religions | Christian Population |
|---|---|---|
| 84.5 million | Muslim 87.5%<br>Christian 12%<br>Other 0.5% | 10 million |

The tumultuous events that preceded and followed President Mohammed Morsi's fall from office in the summer of 2013 capped a period of unprecedented instability in a country not unfamiliar with unrest and popular revolt. The Muslim Brotherhood politician left power less than 30 months after another mass uprising effectively toppled President Mubarak and his regime.

In such cataclysmic circumstances, a rise in violence and other intolerance against Christians was perhaps inevitable, especially given the faithful's minority status. But the scale of attacks both against individual Christians and their place in Egyptian public life went well beyond even the bleakest predictions of the immediate post-Mubarak period.

A trip to Egypt by ACN UK National Director Neville Kyrke-Smith coincided with the dramatic build-up to Morsi's downfall and came as Church leaders, including Coptic Catholic Patriarch Ibrahim Sidrak, were estimating an exodus of at least 200,000 Christians from the country since February 2011. The full figure, likely to be much higher, was only to be expected after such a dramatic surge in atrocities targeting vulnerable faithful – Christian women abducted and raped, churches attacked, dubious blasphemy allegations and threats both verbal and physical.

Christians were in for a nasty shock almost immediately after Mubarak left office as the extent of the Islamist presence across Egypt suddenly became clear. The Christians' shock turned to horror as the Islamists displayed strong organisational skills in ensuring that their strength in numbers translated into political influence. Such a rise to power had unlikely beginnings; while the Muslim Brotherhood had been banned under Mubarak, the far more extreme and anti-Christian Salafists were totally unknown to Christians and many other Egyptians. The Christians who defied their bishops by calling for democracy in Tahrir Square soon feared that their long-held dreams would turn into their worst nightmare; two religious parties, backed by the Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood collectively polled 65 percent of the vote in the November 2011 and January 2012 elections to the Egyptian Parliament's Lower House.

By then, Christians had suffered bitter blows of a very different kind. The New Year's Day 2011 Alexandria bomb blast which left 20 Churchgoers dead turned out to be an ominous portent. Violence returned with a vengeance in May 2011 when three Coptic Orthodox churches in the Cairo suburb of Imbaba were attacked with five fatalities and 230 injuried. Copts' criticism of police inaction hardened into accusations that the security forces were complicit in the attacks against them. In the single worst atrocity against Christians during the period under review, 36 Copts were killed in October 2011 when a protest in Maspero turned ugly. More than 300 were injured in the violence and afterwards the police were accused of being directly responsible. Catholic Church press officer Father Rafic Greiche told ACN: "We are accusing [state security] who used a rabble force of street fighters to attack demonstrators."

But if the Copts were increasingly at odds with the military 'interim' administration which replaced Mubarak, they were quickly to despair of the regime that swept to power in the historic elections of 2012. Soon after becoming President in June 2012, Mohammed Morsi set about creating a constitution which in the event turned out to be explicit in its deference to Islamic *Shari'a* law. Coptic leaders were included on the panel charged with drafting the Constitution but eventually quit, realising that most of their collaborators seemed intent on creating an Islamic state intolerant of minorities. Even before the Constitution was signed into law, the new Coptic Orthodox Patriarch Tawadros II spoke out against it, saying a document "that hints at imposing a religious state must be absolutely rejected". Coptic Catholic Bishop Kyrillos William agreed. Barely 10 days after the constitution became law in December 2012, he told ACN that it "paved the way for an Islamic caliphate".

Soon however, events were turning against President Morsi. His fall from office in July 2013 and Egypt's return to 'temporary' military rule left many if not most people unable to predict what might follow. Nor could it be more important given that Egypt has always been a bellwether for the whole region. Would future historians look back at this point as the moment when the Islamist movement lost its influence as a force for change? Or was it no more than a temporary blip, with momentum still building towards a final show-down with pro-democracy campaigners. Either way, the stakes were high, and the future of Christianity in the region hung in the balance.

February 2011: Extremists broke into the home of a Coptic Christian family and abducted 18-year-old Nesma Sarwat, the daughter of a building contractor responsible for erecting St Mary and St Michael's Church in Tabiya, Giza. The abductors wrote slogans on the walls of the home: "Islam is the solution" and "The church has to be demolished". Names of other family members were scrawled on the walls, prompting observers to suggest that the abductors were warning of coming back to kidnap more of the family. Three months earlier, the church had been the scene of fierce clashes between state forces and Copts protesting at the closure of their church. The security forces used tear gas and live ammunition against the protestors, resulting in three Copts being killed and hundreds of others being injured. 176 Copts were arrested.[122]

February 2011: Christian converts Maher El-Gohary and his daughter, Dina Mo'otahssem, left Egypt having spent two-and-a-half years in hiding. After more than 10 days in Syria, the former Muslims were unable to obtain visas to the USA, where Mr El-Gohary's wife is, or any European country. Mr El-Gohary said: "I feel like we've stepped out of a prison cell and into a fire… My daughter and I divide the bottles of water to live, because there is no income." Mr El-Gohary had sued the Egyptian government in August 2008 for refusing to update his ID to show his religion as Christianity rather than Islam. In the media frenzy that followed, Mr El-Gohary and his daughter were branded apostates and were forced into hiding.[123]

March 2011: Tensions following rumours about a relationship between Christian man, Ashraf Iskander, and a Muslim woman, culminated in Christian homes and a church being torched in the village of Soul, Atfif in Helwan Governorate, 22 miles from Cairo. The problems led to the deaths of both Mr Iskander and the woman's father. Mr Iskander had already been asked to leave the village by Christians and Muslims who had held a meeting aimed at reducing local tensions. Addressing local Muslims during Friday prayers, local imam Sheikh Ahmed Abu Al-Dahab told his congregation to kill the Christians because they had "no right" to live in the village. After the funeral for the woman's father, a 4,000-strong mob of Muslims headed to the village church of St George and St Mina. The mob broke into the Church, looted it, and demolished walls with sledgehammers – including pulling down the cross and the domes – before exploding up to six gas cylinders inside the church. The army put out the fire. Following the violence, a curfew was imposed on the 12,000 Christians in the village. Many Christians fled following the violence. Bishop Balamoun Youaqeem, assistant bishop of Giza, claimed some Christian women who remained in the village were sexually assaulted.[124]

March 2011: Christian man Anwar Mitri had his right ear cut off by extremists who claimed it was legitimate punishment for breach of Islamic *Shari'a* law. Mr Mitri, 45, a secondary school administrator, had a flat in Qena, Upper Egypt, and controversy broke after it was burnt down. He was accused of letting out the premises to prostitutes and having an affair with one of them. Mr Mitri denied the allegations made by Islamists who refused to listen to him, forced him into a chair, and removed his ear. He also received a 10cm cut on the back of his neck as well as cuts on his other ear, face and arm. He was told to convert to Islam but he refused. Only then did the Islamists call the police, reportedly saying: "We have applied the law of Allah, now come and apply your civil law." Initially Mr Mitri said he wanted full compensation. However a "reconciliation" meeting was set up by the local vice military ruler and he agreed to drop all charges against his attackers. Mr Mitri later appeared on Coptic TV channel CTV where he was asked to explain why he had dropped the charges. Mr Mitri sobbed, saying: "I was threatened and they threatened to kidnap the female children in our family."[125]

March 2011: Ayman Anwar Mitri's flat was torched – and when he arrived to investigate he was seized by Salafists who took him inside the burnt-out dwelling and beat him with the remains of his furniture before cutting off his ear. He said: "When they were beating me they kept saying: 'We won't leave any Christians in this country' ". His attackers were not arrested. There were threats to kidnap and kill his family members and afterwards he changed his statement to police, saying that he did not know who attacked him.[126]

April 2011: Human rights organisations staged a protest rally outside the Attorney General's offices to highlight the plight of 9,000 Coptic Christians in the villages of Badraman and Nazlet Badraman in Deir Mawas, Minya. Muslim police informer Ali Hussein and more than 50 armed men were accused of ongoing oppression, including extorting money, raping women, kidnapping children for ransom, destroying crops, and imposing a 6pm curfew on them. Coptic activist Nader Shoukry said security forces had "turned a blind eye" to the problems.[127]

April 2011: An ACN fact-finding and project assessment trip to Egypt, involving visits to all Coptic Catholic dioceses in the country, showed conflicting views concerning the Church's prospects following President Mubarak's downfall. Some Church leaders expressed grave concerns about the rise of Salafist and other Islamist groups, until then scarcely known by the general populace. Meantime, other senior clergy spoke optimistically, suggesting that pro-democracy campaigners would

successfully bring about greater democracy and religious tolerance. Many of the individual Catholics interviewed, especially in Luxor and parts of Upper Egypt, spoke of widespread harassment and intolerance towards Christians. Some spoke of radicals threatening to kill or injure Christians refusing to abandon their faith. Others referred to death threats made against women, including Christians, for refusing to wear a head veil. Others described being forced out of their jobs or being refused employment because of their Christian faith.[128]

May 2011: Police and hundreds of young Coptic Orthodox protected St Mark's Cathedral in Cairo on Friday 6th May when Coptic Pope Shenouda III delivered his weekly sermon to nearly 10,000 church members. Islamist websites called for Copts not to attend the sermon and threatened to 'take action' against the cathedral. Extremists claimed Christians had detained Camellia Shehata, the wife of a priest whom they claim converted to Islam. Thousands of Salafists demonstrated outside the cathedral demanding the release of both Mrs Shehata and Wafaa Constantine, another priest's wife whom they said had also become a Muslim.[129]

May 2011: Three Coptic Orthodox churches in the Cairo suburb of Imbaba were attacked leaving 15 people dead and 230 others injured. Church leaders criticised state security for being "frightened" and "slow" to react as the violence got underway. In an interview with ACN, Coptic Catholic Bishop Antonios Aziz Mina, whose Giza diocese includes Imbaba, said: "The [security forces] will not stand up against the people who do this sort of thing. They want to stay neutral. The police appear but very slowly. They are frightened. They have not been strong enough." Bishop Aziz paid tribute to one of his faithful, 60-year-old grandfather Naashaat Rateeb, who had died in the violence.[130]

May 2011: Islamists attacked Coptic Christians at an ongoing protest in front of the State TV building at Maspero on Saturday 14th May, killing one and injuring more than 100. Around midnight two men in Salafist dress approached the check point for the rally and one opened fire. A second attack occurred when a minibus stopped on the bridge overlooking the protest site, and a dozen men came out of it equipped with Molotov cocktails and stones. The third attack occurred when the Christians were surrounded and a group of men fired guns and threw Molotov cocktails at them. Fr Botros of Moqattam Church claimed the attackers were hired by security authorities to break up the sit-in. Protestors were calling for the release of 17 Christians who had been given a three-year sentence by a military court.[131]

June 2011: 17-year-old Heidi Salib disappeared from a district of Cairo on Tuesday 2nd June. Her family believe she was kidnapped by the same man who seized her in April and tried to force her to convert to Islam. During her first abduction she was sexually assaulted, drugged and the cross tattooed on her wrist – which many Coptic Christians have as an indelible mark of their religious identity – was removed against her wishes. According to Heidi's parents, local police – and even their local member of the Egyptian parliament – supported the girl's kidnappers, intimidated family members and blocked their efforts to have her returned home. After Heidi was reunited with her family they lived in several different locations, trying to prevent a second kidnapping, but ultimately she was taken again.[132]

June 2011: Young girls Nancy, aged 14, and Christine Fathey, 16, both cousins, went missing while walking to Church on Sunday 12th June. Two weeks later, the girls appeared at a Cairo Police station. It was claimed the girls said they had converted to Islam of their own free will and applied for protection from their families. They were placed in a state care home until an investigation could be concluded. Since they were minors, a reconciliation meeting with their parents was ordered. Dr Naguib Gabrierl, President of the Egyptian Organisation of Human Rights, reported that "none of the girls said she converted to Islam. During the meeting with their parents the younger threw herself in the arms of her father, sobbing while the older girl said she was afraid to return home". When lawyers representing the family visited the care home on the 29th June they found the girls had been moved without their knowledge.[133]

July 2011: Six Christians were hospitalised after they were beaten with iron rods and pipes. The cause was ostensibly an altercation between Muslim Gassem Fouad and a pregnant Coptic woman, Ruth. When he tried to assault her, a group of Copts rushed to her defence but were beaten by Muslims. Security forces brought the clash to an end, but they only arrested Christians including Ruth's husband. Fr Estephanos Shehata of Samalout Diocese claimed there were underlying tensions in Ezbet Jacob Bebawi village (north of Minya) because the local church bell had been repaired, angering many local Muslims.[134]

August 2011: Civil servant and livestock farmer Maher Nassif was shot in the head and had his throat slit when he tried to defend his home from a Muslim mob that rampaged in Nazlet Faragallah village in Minya Province. Reports differ over the initial event that led to armed Muslim men gathering in the village on Sunday 7th August but local teacher Melad Thabet reported: "They went around all the neighbouring villages spreading a

rumour that 'the Christians burned the mosque and killed some Muslim people' which isn't true. And suddenly we found that the village was surrounded by Muslims from everywhere." After the Ramadan Fast ended that day the attacks began. Melad Thabet reported that police were scared to get involved and one officer said they were waiting for the army.[135]

August 2011: Coptic Christian girl Nabila Sedky, aged 15, from the poor neighbourhood of Zawya el Hamra in Cairo, disappeared after leaving home bound for school. Later, a Muslim man confessed to abducting her. It was claimed that the objective was to force her to convert to Islam with a view to her marrying the man when she came of age. Despite this progress in the case, Nabila could not be found. Six months after Nabila disappeared, she appeared in a video recording on an Islamic website. In the video, Nabila wears a hijab and states she has converted to Islam and cannot return because "any Christian girl who converts to Islam, you send to the monastery and she is tortured until she dies". Commenting on the video clip, Nabila's father, Sedky Sobhy, said she looked like his daughter but did not sound like her. He believed that she had been drugged and brainwashed. The case is among those seen as a revenge attack by Islamists in response to allegations that Coptic Christians were holding Coptic girls who had converted to Islam in a monastery against their will.[136]

October 2011: Armoured army vehicles ploughed into a 150,000–strong protest in Maspero and ran over the protesters, killing 36 Copts and injuring more than over 300. Eye-witness Filopateer Gamil said soldiers were waiting for the Copic rally to arrive at their pitch near the state television building in Maspero. "They arranged a trap for us. As soon as we arrived they surrounded us and started shooting live ammunition randomly at us. Then the armored vehicles arrived and ran over protesters." Fr Filopateer stated military police and state-sponsored thugs torched police cars, later blaming the damage on the Copts. Fr Rafic Greiche, press officer for the Catholic Church, formally implicated the interim military-led regime in the attacks. Fr Greiche said: "We are accusing [state security] who used… a rabble force of street fighters to attack the demonstrators. They did not have to use force. It was a peaceful demonstration." The rally was in protest over the torching of the church in Elmarinab as well as brutality at earlier protests. [137]

October 2011: A Christian student was killed at a school in Mallawi, Minya Province for his faith on the 16th October. Seventeen-year-old Ayman Labib was told to cover up the cross tattooed on his wrist – which all Coptic Christians have as a sign of identity – and instead put the crucifix he

wore under his shirt on the outside. Eyewitnesses told his family that the teacher began to choke the child and students joined in beating him. The student fled to the toilets but he was caught by classmates who beat him to death.[138]

December 2011: The Cairo Criminal Court released the remaining 27 Coptic detainees who were arrested in connection with the Maspero Massacre. Egypt's Military Prosecutor originally held 34 Coptic Christians while investigating charges of inciting violence, carrying arms and insulting the armed forces during the October 9th Maspero Massacre, which claimed the lives of 27 Christians and injured 329. According to AINA some of those arrested were not present at the Maspero protest and were taken for "being a Christian". Mariam Ayad, wife of detainee Amin Mouneer Ayad, said that after being dropped off near Maspero by his work's bus a soldier asked him if he was a Christian and seeing the cross tattoo on his wrist took him away. After removing his money and mobile phone, the soldiers beat him until he lost consciousness. The mother of arrested Christian Mina Talaat said that her son was arrested after the violence in one of the roads leading to Maspero. "Mina was stopped by a soldier, who called a group of 20 people to come quickly, as he had found a Christian. The group beat Mina with short leather batons until his jaw was broken and he had to hold it back with his hand. He also had wounds in the head requiring 12 stitches."[139]

January 2012: A mob of extremists attacked Coptic Christians in the village of Kebly-Rahmaniya, in Upper Egypt. Chanting Allahu Akbar "God is great", they burned down houses, huts, shops and businesses. A 16-year-old boy was wounded by a bullet and a man, aged 40, had facial injuries. Witnesses stated that the police were slow to react when the violence began, arriving 90 minutes later when most of the buildings were already ablaze. Sources stated that a hut belonging to a Coptic man was destroyed to make way for a mosque. The village now boasts 300 mosques compared to only one Christian church even though Christians are 50 per cent of the population. Coptic sources linked the violence to upcoming parliamentary elections, stating that local Salafist extremists wanted to deter Christians from voting in an area where they had potentially decisive influence, with numbers of more than 20,000.[140]

January 2012: A court ordered an abducted 16-year-old Christian girl, Amira Gamal Saber, to be placed in a state-run care home until she turns 18, instead of returning her to her family, alleging that she wishes to convert to Islam. Miss Saber was abducted from Saft-el-Khamar village, Minya Province in December 2011. Minya's head of security confirmed she

had been kidnapped, telling her family that the abductors were being watched and not to take any action until they were detained. Then on 15th January Mohammad Ahmed Ibrahim phoned the family demanding 200,000 Egyptian pounds for Amira's return. Arriving to pay the ransom they were directed to the police station where Amira was, and told there that government prosecutors were handling the case. The family were then detained and interrogated for seven hours. Attorney Tawfik Kamel, who accompanied the Saber family to Giza, said: "We were surprised to find a bearded lawyer, backed by another 12 Salafist lawyers, appearing in the session, claiming that Amira wants to convert to Islam, and that she does not want to return home as she is afraid of retribution." Mr Kamel presented the prosecution with Amira's birth certificate proving she is only 16 and a certificate from the Fatwa Department of Al Azhar saying they have no record of her, and confirming conversion is not permitted for people under 18 years of age. Mr Kamel said Amira is in a home affiliated to the Shari'a association in Giza, in violation of the court ruling.[141]

February 2012: Christian teacher Makrem Diab was sentenced to six years' imprisonment by a court in Assiut, having been found guilty of insulting the Muslim prophet Mohammad. The case was brought by a colleague who filed a complaint after overhearing a heated discussion between Mr Diab and another teacher. Mr Diab appealed the sentence, but a large mob prevented his lawyers from entering the court for an appeal hearing on 16th March. The appeal hearing took finally place on 5th April, when the judge upheld the six-year sentence.[142]

April 2012: The Coptic Orthodox Church announced its withdrawal from a panel charged with drafting Egypt's new constitution. Church representatives said it was "pointless" to continue participating on the panel saying Christians were unable to exert any influence. The move prompted concerns that the new constitution would end up being written entirely by Islamist parties without due consideration of minority groups.[143]

August 2012: Almost all Christians – 120 families – living in the village of Dahshur fled for their lives. It followed a dispute involving a Coptic launderer, Sameh Samy, who burnt a man's shirt. The owner of the shirt, Ahmad Ramadan, who had initially settled his grievance with Mr Samy, later returned with a 3,000-strong mob ready to attack him and his business. As fighting broke out, Mr Samy eventually hurled a Molotov cocktail from the roof of his home which hit a Muslim passer-by who subsequently died from third degree burns. When Muslim clerics issued threats and the dead man's family declared their intention to exact

revenge, the village's Christians fled. Christian homes and businesses were destroyed. Police charged Mr Samy and two family members with murder and possession of explosives. Despite five arrest warrants being issued for five Muslims involved in the attack, they remain at large.[144]

September 2012: A senior military official warned that Copts in Egypt were at risk of mass slaughter from Islamists as revenge for a film – apparently produced in the USA by two Egyptian Christian immigrants – that depicts the Prophet Mohammed in a negative light. The military official said Islamic groups were planning to kill "the whole Christian community" in Naja Hamadi city, 60 miles outside Cairo.[145]

October 2012: Thousands of Christians and Muslims retraced the footsteps of protestors who exactly a year earlier fell victim to attacks – apparently state approved – which caused the death of 26 Copts. The demonstration of October 2011 was organised to condemn the destruction of two churches and houses of Christians in a village near Aswan. A year on, the protestors marched at a time of increasing tension over alleged government incompetence and growing dismay about its Islamist policies.[146]

December 2012: A week before the vote on the new constitution 50,000 Islamists marched through the city of Assiut chanting that Egypt will be "Islamic, Islamic despite the Christians". Men on horses rode around wielding swords in Christian districts of the city, evoking images of Muslims conquering Christians in the early years of Islam. According to local reports, Christians who tried to vote in some villages were pelted with stones and were forced to turn back before reaching the ballot box.[147]

January 2013: Bishop Kyrillos William, acting administrator of the Coptic Catholic Church, was among three bishops who spoke out against the new constitution ratified by President Mohammed Morsi on 26th December 2012. Bishop William said: "We can see that the religious orientation of this constitution prepares the way for an Islamic caliphate." The bishops – including Bishop Joannes Zakaria of Luxor and Bishop Antonio Aziz Minna of Giza – said the document explicitly upheld the pre-eminence of *Shari'a* in diverse aspects of law and government and in effect took away key human rights of non-Muslims, women and children.[148]

March 2013: A court in Bani Suef, Upper Egypt, rejected an appeal in defence of two children, Rzik Nagy, aged 10, and nine-year-old Mina Farah, who were accused of desecrating the *Qur'an* and who had been held in a juvenile prison since April 2012. The children were stopped by a local imam who accused them of urinating on paper containing verses of

the Qu'ran. Without referring the matter to the police, the imam took the children to a judge who placed the children in detention. The children's parents state that the youngsters are illiterate and could not have known what was written on the pages which were lying in a pile of rubbish."[149]

April 2013: A group of Islamists hurled stones and Molotov cocktails at people outside St Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral, Alexandria where they were attending the funeral of four Christians killed in sectarian clashes two days earlier in Khosous. Speaking about both incidents Coptic Orthodox Patriarch Tawadros II said: "President Morsi has promised to do everything in his power to protect the cathedral but in reality he hasn't." Blaming Mr Morsi for what happened, Tawadros said: "His behaviour comes under the category of negligence and poor assessment of events. In 2,000 years our cathedral has never suffered an attack like that."[150]

May 2013: Christians are being disproportionately targeted by blasphemy cases according to human rights groups. At least 26 cases were filed between early 2011 and the end of 2012.[151]

June 2013: A hard-line Egyptian Muslim preacher was given an 11-year suspended sentence for tearing up and burning a Bible, in a rare case of Egypt's blasphemy laws being applied to an attack against the Christian faith. Ahmed Abdullah destroyed the Bible in front of the US Embassy in Cairo, protesting against an anti-Islam film produced in the USA. His son received an eight-year suspended sentence for the same incident. Egypt has seen a surge in accusations of blasphemy against Islam, with Amnesty International saying that bloggers, journalists and Coptic Christians make up the majority of those accused.[152]

July 2013: Four Copts were killed and others were injured when Salafist Muslims carried out an attack in Al Dabaya village, near Luxor. Islamists blamed one of the four, Emil Naseeem Saroufeem, 42, for the death of a Muslim whose body had been found recently. Mr Saroufeem was tracked down by the extremists who began beating him. He escaped and was hidden by Christian relatives. However the Islamists found Mr Saroufeem and bludgeoned him to death. Those who helped him were also beaten and stabbed repeatedly. The assailants then beat up nearby Coptic villagers before looting and burning their homes.[153]

July 2013: Security officials said suspected militants killed Magdy Habashi, aged 60, a Christian merchant in the northern Sinai Peninsula. He was reportedly abducted from the town of Sheikh Zweid and five days later his decapitated body was found in a cemetery. Mr Habashi was the second

Christian killed in northern Sinai within a week. Coptic priest Mina Abboud Sharobeen was gunned down in an outdoor market.[154]

August 2013: On Tuesday 6th, 10-year-old Jessi Boulus was killed by a gunman with a single shot to her chest when returning from a Bible class. Her mother, Phoebe, said that she was murdered because she was Christian, adding: "[F]or 10 years I was lucky enough to be a mum. I'll miss Jessi calling me mum – I know I won't ever hear it again."[155]

August 2013: The country's oldest church, the Virgin Mary Church in Delga which probably dated back to the fourth of fifth century AD, was among around 80 Christian buildings destroyed by supporters of President Morsi after he was deposed. Bishop Krillos William told ACN that the community had been targeted because the Muslim Brotherhood "think that the Christians were the cause of Morsi being ousted. But the Christians were not alone – there were 35 million who went on the streets against Morsi. Christians are being punished. We have been scapegoated."[156]

# Eritrea

| Population | Religions | Christian Pop. |
|---|---|---|
| 5 million | Muslim 50%, Orthodox 40% Catholic 5%, Protestant 2% Other 3% | 2.5 million |

The persecution of Christians increased in the first five months of 2013 with at least 191 Christians being arrested for practising their faith; a sharp rise from 105 arrests in 2012.[157] Examining the period up to the end of February 2013, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom concluded: "Religious freedom conditions continue to be extremely grave in Eritrea, with torture or other ill-treatment of 2,000 to 3,000 religious prisoners, arbitrary arrests and detentions without charges, a prolonged ban on public religious activities, and interference in the internal affairs of registered religious groups." The US listed Eritrea as a "country of particular concern" in 2004.[158] International concern about abuse of members of religious groups and others grew and in March 2012, 44 countries expressed concern at the UN about the regime's arbitrary detention and torture of its citizens.[159] While the 1997 constitution guarantees religious freedom, the US State department has noted that "the government has yet to implement the constitution in law and practice" and "generally" ignores the rights of believers – including those recognised by the state.[160]

In 1993, soon after Isaias Afewerki became president of the newly independent Eritrea, a government decree recognised the country's four largest religious groups – the Eritrean Coptic Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Catholic Church and Sunni Islam. In spite of this official recognition, during the period under review the government continued to harass members of the faithful and interfere in their internal religious affairs. Only the Catholic Church remains largely autonomous and has resisted attempts to seize its schools, clinics and other institutions. In early 2012, concerns were expressed about the deteriorating health of Patriarch Antonios of the Eritrean Coptic Orthodox Church, who has been under house arrest since January 2006. Following state intervention, Antonios was deposed as Patriarch and replaced by the pro-government Dioskoros, whose authority is not recognised by many Orthodox faithful. Now in his mid-80s, the deposed Patriarch Antonios has been allegedly denied access to healthcare despite suffering diabetes. According to Orthodox sources, more than 1,700 clergymen have been

forced out of the Church – 24 of whom were imprisoned, 14 were banned from Church property, and seven are not allowed to leave the capital, Asmara.[161] Reports show that for Eritrean Orthodox and other state-recognised faith groups, clergy residency permits have frequently been denied and there have been continuing concerns about clergy – including seminarians – being forced into military service. Estimates place the figure at about 3,000. Reports from Eritrea received by ACN suggest slight improvements in state relations with officially approved religious groups.

By contrast, latest reports indicate worsening state-led oppression of faith groups not recognised by the Afwerki regime. In 2002 the government introduced compulsory registration for religious groups other than the four officially recognised religions. Despite the Presbyterian Church, Methodist Church, and several other religious communities submitting the necessary applications – requiring detailed information on their finances, membership, and activities – the government has not granted registration to any applicant and has continued to take militant action to stop people practising their faith, including closing churches.[162] Many Christians unauthorised by the State are among the nearly 500,000 people reported to have crossed the border to neighbouring Ethiopia and Sudan.[163]

Up to 3,000 Christians – many from unregistered Evangelical communities – are understood to be detained, usually inside military bases at Mai Serwa, Sawa and Gelalo, or at police stations, or in the camp for prisoners of religious conscience near Meiter (or Mitire). Prisoners are being held in crowded underground bunkers or metal shipping containers holding up to 50 individuals. It becomes dangerously hot for the prisoners as temperatures climb under the harsh African sun. 31 Christians were reported to have died in prison during 2012.[164] Reports described religious prisoners being hung from trees in painful positions for several weeks until they could no longer move their arms and legs, requiring other prisoners to feed and bathe them, or being forced to walk barefoot on sharp rocks and thorns for an hour each day. Christians were also beaten with rods to extract confessions and told they would be killed if they did not recant their faith.[165]

January 2011: A US Embassy cable published by Wikileaks in 2011 exposed the inhumane conditions in which prisoners were held. Prisoners were fed only two pieces of bread three times a day. A bucket in the middle of the room served as a toilet between escorted bathroom breaks, but it frequently overflowed as a result of not being emptied enough. The

Wikileaks report quoted a former prisoner stating that he and 600 other prisoners were kept in a 40 x 38ft cell, adding: "It was not possible to lie down and barely possible to sit down."[166]

April 2011: 120 Catholics were arrested in Segeneiti for protesting at conscription of nine priests from the local area who had been called up at the Sawa military base. The protesters, made up for the most part of women and old people, were walking and praying in a cortège behind a cross, en route to the district civil administration office, where they were all arrested. Most protesters were released by 5th May, a week after their arrest.

May 2011: 64 Christians from unregistered groups were arrested in Adi Abeyto, a village near Asmara, for illegal religious activities. Six were released, but it is believed the others were either being held in one of the capital's police stations or were transferred to the prison at the Meiter military base.

July 2011: Fears were expressed that Eritrean Christian Eyob Mussie would be executed if he were to be deported from Saudi Arabia, where he was charged with proselytising. Arrested on 12th February 2011 in front of a mosque in Jeddah, Saudi's second largest city, he had reportedly gone there specifically to talk to Muslims about Christianity. Initially the Saudi authorities viewed Mr Mussie as mentally disturbed, but a psychological test found he was fit to stand trial. Finding him guilty of proselytism, the authorities decided to send him back to Eritrea, rather than executing him. Christian Solidarity Worldwide said it was highly likely that the Eritrean authorities would carry out the death penalty and asked the Saudi government to "consider alternative countries for asylum".[167]

August 2011: Reports came in of several deaths of Christians in jail. Hiwet Tesfu, 23, and Zemame Mehari, 27, were in poor health and had been repeatedly tortured and denied medical treatment in the run-up to their death. They were arrested in April 2009 for attending a prayer meeting in Dekemhare. Angesom Teklom Habtemichel, 26, who was imprisoned at Adi Nefase Military Camp in Asab, also died at the end of August 2011. Reports said he suffered from severe malaria but was "denied medical treatment because of his written refusal to recant his Christian faith".[168]

October 2011: Terhase Gebremichel Andu, 28, and Ferewine Genzabu Kifly, 21, died as the result of starvation and untreated health problems. They were arrested during a prayer meeting in 2009 at a private home in

Tesenai. Held at Adersete Military Camp, they suffered two years of physical torture and were denied medical care.[169]

February 2012: Pope Benedict XVI was able to announce the erection of the new Eparachy (diocese of Eastern-rite Church) of Segeneiti, naming Father Fikremariam Hagos Tsalim, Vicar General of Asmara, as the first bishop.

February 2012: A woman who fled to the UK from Eritrea described the persecution of Christians in her native country who belong to unregistered churches. The woman, who escaped via Sudan aged 16, gave details of friends and family still in Eritrea. She said her brother's "polite demeanour" made his military superiors suspicious that he was a Christian. They then found a letter under his mattress with references to his Christian Faith. After he admitted to being a Christian, he was asked to sign a statement agreeing to stop practising his Faith but he refused. He was imprisoned for two years. Another friend aroused suspicion after refusing a drink at a military-camp party and likewise was imprisoned after admitting to being a Christian. The woman said prisoners' mental health frequently broke down as a result of being forced to "do ridiculous things" such as count grains of sand under the extreme heat of the midday sun. She said Christians longed to be allowed to go to church and were at risk of internment if caught with a Bible. [170]

March 2012: Calls were made to allow medical treatment to be given to Patriarch Antonios, (former) head of the Eritrean Coptic Orthodox Church, held by the Eritrean authorities since January 2006. According to Church sources, 85-year-old Patriarch Antonios has been denied healthcare despite being diabetic and in increasingly poor health. Orthodox priest Fr Athanasius Ghebre-Ab said: "It is a miracle that he remains alive without medical care. We urge the Eritrean government to release the patriarch for humanitarian reasons."[171]

August 2012: Authorities arrested 17 Christians in Keren, reportedly for deserting national service, and held them at a military camp in Aderset.[172]

October 2012: Eritrean security officers disrupted a prayer and fasting meeting in a private home in Emba-Derho and arrested 17 Christians. Reporting the incident, which took place on 10th October, eye-witnesses stated that the believers were beaten by the officers as they marched them to a military truck parked on the main road. Women in the group were heard crying and pleading for mercy. Emba-Derho is approximately 8 miles (14km) from Asmara.[173]

November 2012: A Muslim convert to an unregistered Evangelical group died after two years in an underground detention facility where 100 members of unregistered groups were also held.[174]

December 2012: A source in Eritrea said that the compulsory military service is "bleeding the Church in Eritrea to death". The Eritrean government's practice of forced military conscription caused a personnel shortage for the Catholic Church as seminarians and lay church workers were forced into the army.[175]

March 2013: 125 Evangelical Christians were beaten and detained by police, who seized church members from their homes and workplaces in Barentu and then publicly marched them to the police station while beating them. Among those seized were 45 men and women previously arrested on 27th February 2013 for worshipping in non-registered communities.[176]

March 2013: Police officers arrested 17 Christians – including six female students – meeting together at a private home in Keren. While at the police station, officers refused to allow visitors even though it is customary for family members to take food to relatives in jail.[177]

March 2013: Belay Gebrezgi Tekabo, who was arrested in April 2012 for "praying and reading his Bible" during military service, died at Ala Military Camp, about 20 miles from Dekemhare in the south. According to Christian organisation Open Doors, Mr Tekabo was diagnosed with leukaemia six months before his death, but officials informed him that he could only receive treatment at Dekemhare hospital if he signed a statement recanting his faith.[178]

April 2013: A report from Amnesty International revealed that Eritrean refugees, including many Christians who have fled persecution, formed the majority of the victims kidnapped from the Shagarab refugee camps in eastern Sudan. They were taken to Sinai, where they were sold as slaves to criminal gangs.[179]

May 2013: 37 Christian students from the College of Arts and Social Sciences in Adi Kihe, and five men from the Church of the Living God in Asmara, were arrested – taking the total number of Christians known to have been arrested in 2013 to 191. An Eritrean Christian leader, who cannot be named for security reasons, told Christian charity Open Doors that religious persecution in Eritrea is at its "highest level ever and getting worse."[180]

July 2013: Eritrean authorities banned 39 Christian high school students from their graduation ceremony. Christian NGO Open Doors reported that they then began "enduring beating, forced hard labour and insufficient food and water" at the SAWA military training centre. The Open Doors report continues: "Sources said authorities are also threatening the students with long imprisonment and exclusion from university should they 'fail to renounce Christ.'" [181]

August 2013: Eritrean authorities arrested 30 members of the Church of the Living God gathered for evening prayer in the Kushet suburb of the capital Asmara on Saturday 24th. The group included 12 women. According to Open Doors the Christians were held at Police Station 5 in Asmara and pressured to recant their faith.[182]

# India

| Population | Religions | Christian Pop. |
|---|---|---|
| 1.15 billion | Hindu 80%, Muslim 14%<br>Christian 2%, Sikh 2%<br>Other 2% | 22million |

India's constitutional and political commitment to religious freedom is well established in many if not most aspects of law and government. However, extremists and others are able to exploit specific legislation as cover for discrimination against, and sometimes outright persecution of, minorities, notably Christians. In particular states, the government has been found to be complicit in violence and oppression of Christians, perpetrated by radicals with a nationalistic vision of India opposed to minority religious groups. Similarly, as noted by leading human rights observers: "The law was not always enforced rigorously or effectively in some cases of religious violence and prosecution continued to be weak."[183]

Signs of the government's lack of concern for the oppression of Christians were cited as reasons for the continuing violence against them. Research showed that Christians in Karnataka state were the most vulnerable to religious hatred, suffering up to 45 attacks a year. The attacks have been systematic and include facial mutilation, destruction of churches, Bibles, crucifixes, cars and other transport as well as periodic desecration of graves.

The frequency of attacks against Christians and their occurrence in disparate parts of the country has caused widespread unease and sometimes fear. Fundamentalist influence in politics, notably the Hindu Jagarana Vedike, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which espouse Hindutva, ultra-nationalist policies are seen as obstacles to religious freedom particularly given the involvement of radical members in acts of violence against Christians.

Casting a long shadow over the lives of many Christians is the continuing fall-out following the 2007 and 2008 attacks centring on the Kandhamal district of Orissa. The attacks are undoubtedly the worst spate of communal violence faced by Christians in India since the country's independence from Britain in 1947. Taken as a whole, the Kandhamal violence is properly described as an anti-Christian pogrom. In total, there were attacks on more than 320 churches and 5,000 homes. Up to 500 people died and 54,000 people fled their homes.

Memories of the Kandhamal violence remained raw long after the attacks: there was widespread criticism of the police and the courts for failing to punish culprits. In August 2012, 5,000 Kandhamal victims and survivors marked the fourth anniversary of the worst atrocities by taking part in a rally. They carried placards with the words: 'We want justice'. Such justice came, at least in part, a few months later in November 2012 when 12 Kandhamal culprits received six-year prison terms and were fined 5,000 rupees each. But continuing setbacks in court cases meant that for victims closure was still some way off, especially when on that same occasion 10 suspected attackers were acquitted because of lack of evidence. The response of Dr John Dayal, a member of the government's National Integration Council, was that courts in Kandhamal do "not inspire confidence [among victims]… Many killers are still roaming free."[184]

Resentment felt by Kandhamal victims and disenchantment with the system of law and government were felt by minority religious communities far beyond Orissa state, especially in connection with the controversial 'anti-conversion laws'. Applied in five of the country's 28 states, the laws forbid religious conversion taking place "using force, conversion and fraud". Intended to be applied equally with regard to all religions, in practice they are exploited by Hindu nationalists wanting to clamp down on activity by Christians and others which they describe as unwarranted proselytism.

A similar uneven application of the law is a source of grave concern for Christians who are members of India's Scheduled Castes (Dalits). During the period under review, 10,000 people took part in a protest against laws discriminating against Christian and Muslim Dalits. The law, as it currently stands, only grants financial, educational and social rights, including political representation, to Dalits who are Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists. On behalf of the Dalits of other faiths, not least Christians, Christian groups, including the National Council of Churches, held a hunger strike.

Such demonstrations of discontent had little effect, at least in the short-term. With India struggling to draw a line under serious atrocities against Christians, the outlook is set to remain uncertain for the faithful whose large number by no means guarantees them freedom in one of the world's most populous and influential countries.

January 2011: Protestant minister Rev Saul Pradhan disappeared from Pakala village in Kandhamal, Orissa. A few days later, his body was found about a mile from his home. Despite injuries to his body, the case was not

officially investigated. His widow, Nimata, said her husband was killed for trying to reconcile Hindus and Christians in the village – even with those who had torched houses in the village during the 2008 attacks. "We never knew they were nursing a grudge," she said.[185]

February 2011: St Paul International School in Srinagar, Kashmir, was set on fire, completely destroying the administration block, library and computer centre. The principal, Grace Paljor, said that before the attack several threatening calls were made, warning that the school would be burnt down.[186]

July 2011: Baptist Pastor Minoketan (aka Michael) Nayak of Midiakia-Kutipada village in Baliguda, south-west Orissa, was killed. Surendra Nayak, the pastor's eldest brother, said: "[His] dead body was lying in a pit, there was a hole-like wound below his ear. The body had no other bruises or cuts. Certainly it is not a case of accident, it is murder."[187]

August 2011: Attackers targeted Mother Mary Syro-Malankara Catholic Church in Hyderabad, central India, setting fire to the main altar, Bibles, missals, hymnals, crucifixes and liturgical vestments.[188]

September 2011: Our Lady of Vailankanni Catholic Church, in Kottenkulangara village was attacked by vandals wearing masks. The church is in Quilon diocese, South Kerala. The vandals destroyed the altar, vestments, and confessionals. Some Catholics living close to the church went to investigate, but the vandals threw them out of the building. Bishop Stanley Roman of Quilon suggested the attack was by Hindu extremists opposed to plans to build a larger church. "We have had, in recent years, a growth of these Hindu extremist groups in Kerala and we begin to suffer the consequences." [189]

October 2011: Hindutva extremists stormed the End Times Full Harvest Church in Bagesafleshpur, Hassan District, beating Pastor John Frederick D'Souza and some women who tried to protect him. The attackers called the police who ordered the pastor to close the church, claiming the congregation had no regular religious practice permits and was carrying out forced conversions. The same day police in Bangalore arrested another Pentecostal minister Rev Hulimavu of Church of God Full Gospel on similar charges.[190]

November 2011: Sister Valsa John was killed when up to 50 people broke into her home in Pachuwara village, Jharkhand State, reportedly pulling her from her bed and attacking her with a scythe and other sharp

instruments. Sister Valsa had defended the rights of tribal people living in the Pakur district, campaigning against land acquisition by coal firms operating in the area. Cardinal Oswald Gracias, President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, described the 52-year-old Sister of Charity of Jesus and Mary as "a person of courage and faith who gave her life in service of the Gospel".[191]

December 2011: The body of Catholic catechist and Dalit rights activist Rabindra Parichha was discovered in Parichha Bhanjanagar in the Kandhamal district of Orissa State. He had left his family home after receiving a phone call from a neighbour. Mr Parichha's body was later found with the throat cut and stab wounds to his hands and stomach. Mr Parichha, 47, was the third catechist to be killed this year in Kandhamal. Archbishop John Barwa, who taught Mr Parichha as a student, said: "Police have arrested three people in connection with the case and Hindu radicals could be behind the murder."[192]

January 2012: Hindutva radicals armed with sticks and iron bars attacked 20 Pentecostal Christians in a private home in Karnataka State. The nationalists accused the Christian group in Anekal, near Bangalore of proselytizing and forced conversions. During the attack, Pastor Shanthakumar Srirangam lost a finger on his left hand. One of those who was attacked, Mrs Yashodamma, sustained a head injury and possibly permanent damage to a nerve in her right hand.[193]

January 2012: Graves in a Christian cemetery were destroyed by a bulldozer. Christians claimed the incident was instigated by local BJP councillor Chanchal Parmar. The area where the graves had been flattened was used as a car park. Representatives of All India Christian Council filed complaints at the Sabarmati police station alleging police inaction. Members also demanded the chief minister's resignation. [194]

January/February 2012: Christian teacher Shrimati Sambhai, from Kanker, Madhya Pradesh, was prevented from starting her new job because of her Christian faith. The Madhya Pradesh government appointed Ms Sambhai as a pre-school teacher, but when she tried to start her new job the village head, Dhanuram Behari, and community leader Hiralal Behari persuaded the state to revoke the appointment because of her faith. Ms Sambhai filed a police complaint but six weeks later she was still not allowed to take up her post.[195]

February 2012: Dasrath Mandari expelled his Christian wife, Satwantin Mandari, from their home in Tuthuly village, Kanker, Madhya Pradesh after Hindutva extremists told Mr Mandari that they would ostracize the family

unless his wife returned to Hinduism. He expelled her that evening. Mrs Mandari took shelter with a Christian family in Kanker.[196]

March 2012: Hindutva extremists attacked Christians holding a prayer meeting at a church member's home in Kalkaji, New Delhi. They alleged that Christians had desecrated statues of Hindu gods and goddesses and made insulting remarks about them. The prayer meeting consisted of leader Jagdish Dey, six women and a few children. When the meeting finished, the extremists dragged Mr Dey into the street where about 30 armed men tried to beat him, but he was protected by the women. Police arrived and took him into custody at the local station. 50 Hindutva extremists arrived at the police station and reportedly pressured police into forcing Mr Dey to promise to stop holding prayer meetings. Church Pastor Chellappan said: "It was a false allegation against us – we do not talk about other people's religion, nor teach people to talk ill against any other faith." Local extremists are accused of stopping Christians from using the public water pump.[197]

May 2012: A group of about 100 Indian Tamil militants attacked 184 Sri Lankan Christians, preventing them from making the annual pilgrimage to Our Lady of Health Vailankanni, in Tamil Nadu. Police escorted the pilgrims - mostly women and children – back to Trichy airport, to protect them from further violence. Police said the attackers were Eelam activists, fighting for the creation of an independent Tamil state in Sri Lanka. [198]

November 2012: A court sentenced 12 people to six years' imprisonment for their involvement in the violence in Orissa's Kandhamal district in 2008. The judge also fined the defendants 5,000 rupees in connection with arson, rioting and the torching of houses in Jarkinaju village, near Raika, on 25th August 2008. Ten others who had been accused in the case were acquitted because of a lack of evidence. Responding to the sentencing, Dr John Dayal, a member of the government's National Integration Council, said: "The aggregate of justice in the fast-track courts in Kandhamal does not inspire a sense of confidence and closure among the victims. Many killers are roaming free and a Member of the Legislative Assembly is at large after his conviction because the courts seem to think he is too important to be incarcerated."[199]

April 2013: Concerns for Christians in Chattisgargh state heightened after another incident, this time a night-time arson attack against a church in a village in Kondagaon district. The day after the fire, the villlage's Christians were publicly insulted and threatened by local Hindu fundamentalists

belonging to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, who accused them of converting people through fraud and seduction. The incident came after a group of Hindu fundamentalists, along with some police officers, demolished a church in the Jagdalpur district of Chattisgarh, claiming it was built illegally.[200]

June 2013: Sajan George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christians, said: "Incidents of intimidation, harassment and acts of violence against individuals and small communities continue. This happens especially against the Christian minority in those states that have adopted anti-conversion laws." He said the laws are applied unevenly, that they are rigorously enforced in cases of Hindus converting to another faith but are often ignored regarding Christians and others who apostatise. "In public, the BJP and these groups claim to respect and tolerate other religious groups. In reality, the RSS [Hindutvatra-nationalist umbrella movement] opposes conversions from Hinduism to [other] faiths…"[201]

August 2013: Lakshmi Priya, a 23-year-old convert, was abducted by her parents to stop her from becoming a nun. Priya, an engineer from a Hindu family, had converted to Christianity and was undergoing religious formation in Chennai with the intention of entering a religious order. Police, who were hunting for Priya's parents, said they appear to have abducted her because they were opposed to her conversion.[202]

August 2013: Following the sudden death of seven-year-old boy, a pupil at St. Francis Xavier Catholic School, from cardiac arrest on Friday 19th a crowd attacked the Jesuit mission in Jharkhand, demanding one million rupees in compensation. The Sisters of the Congregation of Mary Immaculate, who work in the school, had their convent destroyed. Jesuits suspect the attack was instigated by Hindutva fanatics.[203]

# Indonesia

| Population | Religions | Christian Pop. |
|---|---|---|
| 238 million | Muslim 79%<br>Christian 11.8%<br>Other 9.2% | 28 million |

A rise in attacks against churches and a growth in anti-Christian sectarianism have presented an increasing challenge in a country with a strong democracy and a reputation for tolerance and religious moderation. In this, the world's most populous Muslim country, there is widely-felt concern about both the number of attacks and their gravity. The violence has deeply unnerved many communities, both Christian and others. Research by a leading Christian human rights organisation showed that there were 75 attacks on churches in 2012, the highest since 2007. The growth in violence has been linked to an alliance made between jihadist groups, funded and organised with international support. By February 2013, reports emerged of three Protestant churches being attacked with Molotov cocktails. Particularly grotesque among the attacks was an assault on a church in Jakarta where 300 extremists threw bags filled with urine, forcing worshippers to abandon the building only a few minutes into their service.

The government of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who was re-elected in 2009, has received widespread praise for its measures to tackle violence and intolerance – initiatives which have won strong support. One organisation which monitors anti-Christian violence noted that in 2012, quick and effective police action "saved" 50 churches from attack, up from 13 in 2010. But other human rights observers have been more critical of the government's resolve to defeat anti-Christian violence. Authorities have been accused of insufficient action to bring culprits to justice.

Of particular concern are reports of government concessions to Islamists determined to prevent the erection of churches and other Christian buildings. In other cases, fully functioning and well-used churches have been forcibly closed, apparently arbitrarily, with no right of appeal for the Christians affected. In particular instances, Christian leaders who had been delighted when church building applications were finally approved after 10 years were cruelly disappointed when the decision was overturned at the last minute.

The withholding of permits to build churches is one of a number of legal procedures that are exploited by extremists wanting to discriminate against Christians. But in general most religious communities are able to operate openly and without major restrictions, especially the members of the country's six officially recognised religions, namely Islam, Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism and Confucianism. Civil society organisations, including many moderate Muslims, have worked together to counter violence, cooperating with local police.

However, in certain parts of the country specific provincial laws are particularly problematic for Christians. In Aceh, for example, Islamic law remains in force and is strictly applied by the provincial government ever since the official recognition of *Shari'a* law by Presidential decree in 2003. Differences in the law from region to region are just one reason why violence and intolerance is mostly localised, with 'sensitive' areas such as Java falling victim to many if not most violent acts against Christians.

However, with religious violence reported by church communities in the capital, Jakarta, concerns are growing that Islamist terror networks are spreading. Expectations are of sectarian and specifically anti-Christian intolerance growing in the run-up to the 2014 general and presidential elections.

February 2011: Murhai Barda, head of the Islamic Defenders Front in Bekasi, and two accomplices, Ahmad Faisal and Ade Firman, were each sentenced to at least five months in jail for an attack in September 2010 in which Protestant Pastor Afian Sihombing was stabbed in the stomach and taken to hospital in a critical condition. The three Islamists were among eight people involved in the attack on Rev Sihombing, who heads a Protestant community in East Pondonk Bekasi regency. Also injured was Rev Luspida Simanjutak, head of the Huria Batak Kristen Protestan, who received wounds to the face and back. It was alleged that the two ministers had been attacked after refusing to abandon plans to hold an open air service in Liketing Itsem, in East Pondonk Bekasi, despite violent protests by local Muslim fundamentalists. Police denied the attacks were religiously motivated. But human rights lawyer Todung Mulya Lubis described the violence as a "clear act against the right to worship" and Jesuit priest Fr Franz Magnis Suseno said the incident showed how "Indonesians are starting to be less tolerant today, unlike the past".[204]

September 2011: A bomb exploded outside a church in Solo, Central Java, on Sunday, sparking fear among Christian communities. That same

month, two improvised explosive devices were found in Ambon in front of the Synod Office of the Protestant Church of the Molucca Islands and the Maranatha Christian church. Police removed the unexploded bombs.[205]

October 2011: Indonesian police chief Lt Col Lufti Martadian reported the arrest of Beni Asri, aged 26, a terror suspect wanted in connection with a series of attacks. He was accused of helping to plot a suicide bomb attack on a church in So, Central Java, in which 20 people were injured.[206]

May 2012: More than 300 Muslim extremists threw bags filled with urine at the walls of a Protestant church in Jakarta, interrupting an Ascension Day service. They shouted anti-Christian slogans and insults and forced church leaders to stop five minutes into the service. The Christians quickly left the site fearing for their safety.[207]

July 2012: Indonesian extremist groups plan to band together to regain strength, according to the International Crisis Group. In a report, the group states that jihadist groups are taking on "new alliances", awakening "sleeping cells" and recruiting new members online. The report concluded that the influence of extremism achieved a major breakthrough following a 2010 alliance between an extremist group of Medan (North Sumatra), a cell of the Jamaah Anshorut Tauhid movement in Poso and a group called Tim Hisbah in Solo, Central Java. Leading clergy and Christian persecution groups have stressed the threat posed to religious minorities and Muslim moderates by the rise of extremism.[208]

October 2012: Reports emerge of the closure of nine churches and six Buddhist temples in Banda Aceh following mounting pressure from local Islamist groups.[209]

November 2012: Muslim protestors stopped the congregation of a Protestant church from holding a Sunday service in front of the church they have been trying to build in Bekasi district, West Java. Church members said they had to call off the service after finding that protestors had arrived ahead of them. The Christians tried to remonstrate with the protestors, who began making threats and playing very loud music. A long legal battle to construct the church resulted in the Supreme Court siding with the congregation but the permit still had not been issued.[210]

December 2012: The turn-out at Christmas Eve services was higher than usual in Central Java as the faithful defiantly ignored threats made by the Islamic Defence Front and other extremists. The Islamists were aggrieved at plans for an outdoor Mass in a square close to Ungaran's Grand

Mosque. Perhaps encouraged by police determination to stop the attacks, thousands of Christians went to the services. Ignoring concerns of Islamic leaders, 12 Muslim youths from a state university attended Christmas Mass at St Francis Xavier's Catholic Church, in Kebon Dalem, Central Java. Parish priest Fr Aloysius Budi praised the boys, saying that they asked permission before entering the church. He said: "In the beginning I was not impressed. But when I met these young students I was convinced about their true intentions."[211]

February 2013: Three Protestant churches in Makassar, capital of South Sulawesi, were attacked by unidentified men on motorbikes, throwing Molotov cocktails. Nobody was hurt. The attacks, which caused only limited damage, took place at dawn on Valentine's Day, which is frowned upon in the country because of its links to the West, perceived as decadent and promiscuous. A police spokesman in Jakarta said the attack was part of an Islamist campaign to fuel religious and sectarian conflict.[212]

March 2013: In his Easter reflection, Archbishop Johannes Maria Trilaksyanta Pujasumarta of Semarang spoke out against anti-Christian violence and oppression, highlighting the closure and demolition of churches. He said: "I'm very concerned about violence against Christians. Violence is used to deal with issues [relating to] the construction of Christian worship places and schools. What concerns me more is that the perpetrators are local people. They are even backed by certain parties that should protect this country."[213]

March 2013: Hundreds of Muslim extremists staged a two-day protest against the construction of St Stanislaus Kotska Catholic Church in Kranggan, in West Java Province. Taking to the streets, the demonstrators alleged the building would fuel sectarian anger. Catholics stressed the paperwork is in place and took 10 years to complete. Awung Dewabrata, secretary of the Catholic organising committee, insisted that "scrupulous work" was undertaken "without ever proselytising" among non-Catholics.[214]

April 2013: Hundreds of people including religious leaders from a number of denominations and faiths took part in a street protest against restrictions on freedom to worship. The rally, organised by the Religious Leaders' Forum in Greater Jakarta, followed the recent demolition of places of worship by local authorities and officials from the government's Public Order Agency. In a speech, forum coordinator Rev Erwin Marbun referred to the recent closure and demolition of a number of places of worship. Warning that the restrictions could lead to widespread violence, he said

the oppression "happens because of the government's will, which is supported by intolerant groups".[215]

June 2013: The powerful Indonesian Ulema Council has issued a fatwa against Catholic schools in Tegal district, Central Java province, describing them as "haram" (sinful) to Muslim youngsters. The council's statement caused shock, with many stressing the schools' record of high quality education. The schools have been under threat of closure because of their opposition to a government order requiring them to teach Islam to non-Christian pupils.[216]

July 2013: The Annual Report of IndonesianChristian.org, a Protestant organisation which monitors the situation of the Christian community, reported increasing intolerance against Christians in Aceh, saying that 17 churches had been stopped from meeting. Most of these were House Churches, but a few Catholic chapels were also been closed. The crackdown reportedly followed a pledge by the province's governor, Zaini Abdullah, who promised the "full application" of sharia law, despite protests from the central government in Jakarta.[217]

August 2013: After two Molotov cocktails were thrown into the grounds of a Catholic school, Archbishop Ignatius Suharyo of Jakarta urged people to remain vigilant. According to school officials the hand-made petrol bombs were thrown inside the compound of Assisi Catholic School in Tebet, South Jakarta by someone on a motorcycle, during the early morning of Tuesday 6th. Two bombs also went off at the Vihara Buddhist temple in Kebun Jeruk. The attacks were believed to be the work of Muslim extremists.[218]

# Iran

| Population | Religions | Christian Population |
|---|---|---|
| 72 million | Muslim 98.5%<br>Other 1.5% | 200,000 |

State oppression of Christians and other minorities in Iran has "intensified" markedly, especially arrests, torture, false imprisonment and executions, with a corresponding increase in raids on churches and confiscation of Bibles.[219] The consensus among leading human rights observers is that the state has mounted a crackdown on religious activity which is not in accordance with the official practice of Shia Islam, as upheld by the ruling elite led by Ayatollah Ali Khomenei.

The trigger prompting this renewed clampdown on religious liberty is widely seen to be government reaction to the June 2009 presidential elections, which sparked widespread popular unrest that was perceived as a challenge to the state's authority. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom stated that since the June 2009 elections, "religious freedom conditions have regressed to a point not seen since the early days of the Islamic Revolution" of 1979.[220]

Christians, Bahais, Jews and others are susceptible to mistreatment and worse because they have little or no protection in law. Although Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians are recognised by the state, in practice their situation is precarious. Catholics, however, encounter fewer difficulties than certain Evangelical groups, as was discovered during an autumn 2012 ACN trip to Iran, the first of its kind to the country. Christian Solidarity Worldwide noted that in the past year "there has been an alarming rise in detentions of members of evangelical house churches", and reported the faithful suffering verbal and sometimes physical abuse. Others, the report said, experienced repeated interrogations, sleep deprivation, solitary confinement and "pressure to inform on others and abandon their faith".[221]

Hanging over Christians of all descriptions is the threat of being charged with proselytism, a crime punishable by execution. The same sentence applies to apostates from Islam.

An apostasy charge was placed against Pastor Youcef Nadarkani in a case that has attracted unprecedented international attention, particularly after he was found guilty in September 2010. Following an international outcry,

the charge against him was altered and, after nearly three years in prison, he was released in January 2013.[222]

What his case demonstrated was the perils of witnessing to Christianity in Iran. All public expressions of non-Islamic faith are strictly banned, meaning for example that the publication of religious material is severely restricted. Printing firms have been forcibly closed for publishing Bibles and other non-Islamic faith literature. Similarly, Christians and other religious minority groups are banned from senior government or military posts. None are allowed to serve in the judiciary, security services or as principals of public schools. Applicants for public sector employment are screened for their knowledge of and adherence to Islam. Of the 290 seats reserved in the Majles (the Iranian Parliament), non-Muslims only have five seats – three for Christians, one Jewish and one Zoroastrian.

Against such a backdrop, Christians have little or no defence against a growing culture of state oppression. Reports state that at least 300 Christians have been arbitrarily arrested and detained across the country. Former President Ahmadinejad is quoted as having "called for an end to the development of Christianity in Iran".[223] Hopes of a change under new President Hassan Rowhani, elected in June 2013, centred on his much-publicised "moderate" stance. However, his apparent commitment to reform has been called into question by Iranian observers, highlighting his hard-line religious background. They have also noted the pre-eminence of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khomenei in most areas of public policy.

Iran observers note that the new president will be further constrained by ongoing state concerns about the growth of Christianity in Iran. Some unconfirmed reports suggest the country could be home to more than 300,000 Christians.[224] Amid growing conflict between the main branches of Islam across the Middle East, Iran is unlikely to react positively to any suggestion that Christianity is on the rise at the centre of the Shia world.

January 2011: Behnam Irani, a 41-year-old pastor from Karaj, Iran, was convicted of crimes against national security and sentenced to one year in prison. He started his sentence in May 2011 but was told in October that he would have to serve five years because of a previous conviction.[225]

April 2011: Pastor Behrouz Sadegh-Khanjani of the Church of Iran and five other church members were sentenced to a year in prison for "propaganda against the regime" by the First Branch of the Revolutionary

Court in the southern city of Shiraz. However the court acquitted the Christians of "acting against national security".[226]

May 2011: The Revolutionary Court in the northern city of Bandar Anzali tried 11 members of the Church of Iran, including Pastor Abdolreza Ali-Haghnejad and Zainab Bahremend – the 62-year-old grandmother of two of the other defendants – on charges of "acting against national security."[227]

May 2011: The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran called for Iranian authorities to stop the judicial persecution of members of the Evangelical Church of Iran and appealed to Iran's judiciary to overturn criminal sentences of church members including the death sentence for Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani and prison term for Pastor Behrouz Sadegh-Khanjani. Aaron Rhodes, a spokesperson for the Campaign, said: "It is deeply hypocritical to criticise European countries for discriminatory policies against Muslims while the Iranian government throws Christians and members of other minority religions into prison and sentences some to death." In April 2011, during the 16th special session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Iranian government criticised the EU and US for discrimination against religious minorities. Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad Hosseini said: "We expect European countries to guarantee the individual and social freedoms of Muslims."[228]

July 2011: The Barnabas Fund said that Iranian authorities had been issuing anti-Christian propaganda via state media. A spokesman for the organisation said: "False and insulting stories about Christians have also appeared in government media. One such article that was published on the website Youth Online alleged that women evangelists were going into stores, using shopping as a pretext to enter into conversation with staff, and then suggesting sexual liaisons and insulting Islam."[229]

August 2011: 6,500 pocket Bibles were seized as they were being transported between the cities of Zanjan and Ahbar in the north-western province. Speaking about the seizure, parliamentary advisor Majid Abhari told the Mehr news agency that Christian missionaries sought to deceive Iranians, particularly young people. He said, "They have begun a huge campaign by spending huge sums and false propaganda for deviating the public. …The important point in this issue – that should be considered by intelligence, judicial and religious agencies – is that all religions are strengthening their power to confront Islam, otherwise what does this huge number of Bibles mean?" [230]

December 2011: Iranian authorities raided an Assemblies of God Church in Ahvaz, south-west Iran, arresting all those in the congregation. The majority were released within days, but the pastor, Farhad Sabokroh, and another church member were only released on bail after serving two months in prison. No charges were filed.[231]

February 2012: Christian convert Masoud Delijani was sentenced to three years' imprisonment by the Revolutionary Court of Kermanshah Province. Charges included "having faith in Christianity", "holding illegal house church gatherings", "evangelising Muslims" and an unspecified action against Iran's national security. Sources suggest that he was given no chance to defend himself. During a house-church meeting on 17th March 2011, Delijani was detained by plain clothes intelligence officers, along with his wife and nine other Christians. After 114 days in custody, mainly spent in solitary confinement, he was released in July 2011, after his family paid the equivalent of US$100,000 (£62,500) in bail. He was detained again two weeks later.[232]

February 2012: 78-year-old Mrs Hakimpour, a member of the Anglican Church of St Luke in Esfahan, was seized at her home in the early hours of the morning. She is a retired nurse, and the sister-in-law of the former Anglican Bishop, Iraj Motahedeh. She was eventually allowed home three days later. The Rev Hekmat Salimi of St Paul's Church was also arrested on the same day. The minister's home was raided by local government agents, and books, a computer and other personal belongings were confiscated. No reason was given for either arrest.[233]

March 2013: Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani was declared alive and well in a statement refuting earlier reports that he had been executed. The pastor, who is in his 30s, was arrested in 2009 after apparently questioning the Muslim monopoly of religious education of young people, which he saw as unconstitutional. The ensuing court case resulted in a ruling that he had abandoned the Islamic faith of his parents. In September 2010 he was found guilty of apostasy and, in contravention of Iran's Penal Code, he received verbal notification of a death sentence. The case was referred to the Supreme Court. At the retrial in September 2011 he was offered annulment if he converted to Islam. He refused. After several weeks, the case was referred to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. Nadarkhani's charges were altered, with some reports saying he was effectively being charged with crimes against national security. On 8th September 2012 he was acquitted of apostasy but was found guilty of proselytising Muslims. The court ruled that he had already served the

prison term for which he was sentenced and he was immediately set free. However, he was taken back into custody on Christmas Day 2012 only to be released early the following month.[234]

April 2013: Pastor Saeed Abedini was told by officials at Evin Prison that he would be held longer than his eight-year sentence unless he recanted his Christian Faith. In a letter, dated 9th March, he wrote: " 'Deny your faith in Jesus Christ and return to Islam or else you will not be released from prison. We will make sure you are kept here even after your eight-year sentence is finished.' These are the threats that prison officials throw at me." The pastor has suffered from internal bleeding as a result of beatings and torture. In January 2013 Mr Abedini, who holds Iranian and US nationality, had been sentenced to eight years in prison on charges related to his religious beliefs.[235]

June 2013: Christian commentators reacted positively to media statements from Presidential candidate Hassan Rohani pledging to uphold civil liberties. Iranian television broadcast an election debate in which he said he was committed to "upholding justice across the country and civil rights". He told Iran's reformist daily newspaper Sharq: "What I wish for is for moderation to return to the country. This is my only wish. Extremism pains me greatly. We have seen many blows as a result of extremism."[236]

September 2013: Pastor Hendri Budi Kusumo and four other members of the Indonesian Mission Evangelist Church were arrested in West Aceh, the Indonesian province where *Shari'a* law is in force. According to reports the local religious police, which is in charge of enforcing Islamic norms, accused them of proselytism for trying to "convert Muslims to Christianity in the area of Aceh."According to local media, the arrested Christians were seized from their homes in Blang Pulo the village in the middle of the night.[237]

# Iraq

| Population | Religions | Christian Pop. |
|---|---|---|
| 35 million[238] | Shia 60%, Sunni 37%<br>Christians 1%<br>Others 2% | 400,000 |

A decade of some of the worst sectarian violence in a region constantly buffeted by conflict has left all religious groups in Iraq battered and bruised. But Christians stand out as among those who have suffered most and who have most to lose in the years to come.

Latest reports show that since 2002 at least 73 churches have been attacked – at least 44 in the capital, Baghdad, and more than 20 in the northern city of Mosul. At a meeting with Pope Francis in March 2013, Baghdad's new Chaldean Patriarch, Louis Raphael I Sako, head of the largest Church in Iraq, told the new Pontiff that 950 of his faithful had been "martyred". Each successive attack has had a devastating effect on the faithful's morale, prompting yet another wave of migration. Thousands of Christians fleeing Baghdad and Mosul have fallen victim to religious discrimination, problems exacerbated in disputed areas by conflicts between regional authorities in Arbil and the national authorities based in the capital. Christians have responded by emigrating, a phenomenon dating back many years but now so serious as to risk causing the Church to disappear into complete obscurity.

The exodus has been as fast as it has been catastrophic. Christians numbered asmany as 1.4 million in 1987 when a census was taken under Saddam Hussein. In the years that followed, figures varied considerably regarding Iraq's Christian population, as was to be expected at a time of flux and widespread movement of people. The impact of violence and persecution post the 2003 overthrow of Saddam was soon felt, with official reports for 2006 stating that there were fewer than 1 million Christians, with 700,000 others living abroad.[239] By 2013, Church leaders said there were 284,000 Catholics with perhaps only 400,000 Christians in total.[240] In one of the few positive developments, reports emerged that Christians who had fled to Syria after 2003 were now returning after violence flared between President Assad's regime and the rebels. But overall, the impact of emigration of Christians from Iraq was devastating. In a homily given at his installation as Patriarch in spring 2013, Raphael I explicitly warned against the dangers of Christians continuing to leave, saying: "If emigration

continues, God forbid, there will be no more Christians in the Middle East. [Christians] will be no more than a distant memory."

Emigration emerged as the uppermost concern of Church leaders who were met by staff from ACN during a fact-finding and project-assessment visit to the country in October 2012. At one big church in central Baghdad, parish priest Fr Robert Jargis said that in 1995 there were 1,500 families attending Mass and that by late 2012 there were only 120.

Research shows that Shia Muslims were the victims of the most violence. However Christians were particularly at risk because, unlike many other religious groups, they lacked militia or self-sponsored security surveillance. Compounding the problems were reports that many Christians who remain were too afraid or too poor to come to church – public transport is too expensive and it is too dangerous to venture out on foot. During the October 2012 ACN visit to Baghdad, local Christians said coming to Mass was impossible at a time of continuing security problems. Some spoke of harassment, others reported receiving messages filled with religious hatred being dropped into their gardens by passers-by, verbal abuse in the streets and discrimination in schools, markets and the workplace. It seemed few Christians had yet to be reassured by extensive government efforts to step up security around churches, especially after the catastrophic 31st October 2010 siege at Our Lady of Salvation Syrian Catholic Cathedral, which left 58 people dead including two young priests. Government-sponsored repairs to churches targeted by extremists again did not necessarily guarantee the faithful would feel safe coming back to worship in them.

Part of the crisis of confidence has been a cultural and political shift towards Iraq becoming an Islamic theocracy where minority religious groups feel they have no place. Church leaders have reported a growth in influence from both Iran and Saudi Arabia and a growing tension between increasingly assertive Shia and Sunni groups in government and society. Against a backdrop of pressure from all sides, Christians are increasingly faced with either fleeing abroad or living behind closed doors in relative or complete obscurity.

January 2011: Archdeacon Emanuel Youkhana, a senior Iraqi priest, said Christians were being systematically attacked in a bid to drive them out of the country. The archdeacon, who coordinates humanitarian aid for Christian families in Iraq, told ACN that neither the government in Iraq nor the international community had done enough to stem the exodus of

Christians in the region. Archdeacon Youkhana, who is from the Assyrian Church of the East, denounced the Iraqi government and the media for denying that Christians had been specifically targeted in the attacks. Noting that Baghdad University's music department had been closed because music was incompatible with *Shari'a* law, he added that Islamisation now affected every aspect of Christians' daily lives. He said Christian women now felt pressurised to wear the veil when appearing in public.[241]

April 2011: On Easter Day, two bombs exploded in quick succession outside two churches in Baghdad's Karrada district. First to be attacked was the Sacred Heart Catholic Church. At least two Iraqi policemen and two passers-by suffered shrapnel wounds. Mass-goers had already left. In the second attack, four police officers were wounded in a gunfight with armed men outside Mary the Virgin Catholic Church as people attending Easter Day Mass huddled inside. One parishioner later said: "Thank God nobody was hurt and everyone made it out safely," adding that the Mass had begun when the gunfire started.[242]

May 2011: The decapitated body of Ashur Yacob Issa, 29, a Christian man, was discovered in Kirkuk city, a few days after he was kidnapped. Mr Issa's family had been unable to pay the £61,500 ransom the kidnappers demanded. Archbishop Louis Sako of Kirkuk condemned the killing and paid tribute to the courage and faith of Christians in the city in spite of the continuing violence. Speaking to a Catholic news agency, Archbishop Sako appealed to "those who were capable of committing such an inhuman act" to remember Mr Issa's widow and the children they had orphaned. He added: "If there is no human justice, sooner or later there will be divine justice."[243]

August 2011: At least 13 people were injured when a bomb exploded at Holy Family Church in Kirkuk. Another bomb at an evangelical church in the city reportedly failed to explode. Commenting on the attacks, Chaldean Auxiliary Bishop Shlemon Warduni of Baghdad said: "Our hope is in the Lord alone. I ask everybody to pray for peace and security and to [encourage] the governments to do something good for Iraq and the Middle East." The bishop went on to allege that organisations outside Iraq were supplying arms to militant groups and condemned countries which sell weapons. About 10 days earlier, bombers targeted St Ephraim's Syrian Orthodox Church, close to the Chaldean cathedral, in the city centre. The bomb exploded at 1.30am and nobody was hurt but St Ephraim's was seriously damaged in the blast.[244]

September 2011: Iraq Archbishops Amil Nona of Mosul and Bashar Warda of Erbil told Hermann Van Rompuy, President of the Council of Europe, that religious freedom in Iraq was seriously endangered. Stressing the plight of Christians in Iraq, the two Chaldean-rite bishops appealed for help to build schools. Archbishop Warda said that, with Muslims filling 90 percent of places available, Church-run schools benefited the whole of society and were important for promoting inter-faith cooperation. Archbishop Warda said: "Education would help to develop a new culture as well as freedom of religion, opening up new perspectives for young people."[245]

October 2011: Two Christians were found dead in the Muthana district of Kirkuk. 50-year-old Emmanuel Polos Hanna was found by the highway leading to Baghdad. He had been shot to death. A group of armed men killed 30-year-old restaurant worker Bassam Isho.[246]

October 2011: Kurdistan Governor Tamar Ramadhan gave Baptists two acres of land worth US$2 (£1.25) million to build a new centre including a medical clinic, school, sports ground, building and seminary.[247]

December 2011: After weekly prayers on Friday 2nd, up to 500 people in Zakho, Kurdistan, set ablaze shops owned by Christians and Yezidis, a Kurdish religious group. Worshippers left the local mosque shouting "Allahu Akhbar" – "God is great" – and began targeting off-licences as well as hotels and massage parlours. At least 30 people were injured and the damage to businesses was later valued at US$5 (£3.2) million. The mob swelled to more than 3,000 and went on to attack Christian property in nearby Dohuk and another town close by. The following morning, a mob of 100, mainly youths, threw stones at a church and homes belonging to Christians. Leaflets were put on the walls of burned shops threatening owners with death if they reopened them. [248]

December 2011: 29-year-old Chaldean Christian Sermat Patros was kidnapped while at his family's home furnishings store in Ankawa. His captors demanded a ransom of $500,000 (£300,000) but he was rescued by a SWAT team. The kidnappers were thought to be motivated by money.[249]

December 2011: Despite an overall decline in violence, verbal attacks, intimidation and discrimination against Christians and other minorities increased, according to Minority Rights Group International, a human rights NGO. Calling for an Anti-discrimination Law, MRGI stressed problems for Christians accessing employment, education and healthcare.[250]

March 2012: The Syrian Orthodox Church of St Matthew in Baghdad was hit as part of a series of bombings by extremists in attacks that killed 52 people in total. In the attack at St Matthew's, two guards were killed and five others were wounded. The Iraqi government said the attacks were intended to "present a negative image of the security situation" in Iraq ahead of the Arab League summit, and it was alleged that targeting a church would generate more media coverage and concern in the West.[251]

September 2012: A bomb hidden in a bag exploded at the door of Sacred Heart Chaldean Cathedral, Baghdad. The blast on a Sunday evening caused damage but nobody was hurt as everyone had left following evening Mass. The blast coincided with the conclusion of Pope Benedict's visit to Lebanon, at which Archbishop Sako of Kirkuk was present.[252]

March 2013: In a meeting with Patriarch of Baghdad Raphael I Sako, newly-elected Pope Francis heard how in recent years 57 Catholic churches across Iraq were attacked and 950 faithful were "martyred". Reporting the Pope's response, Patriarch Sako said: "When I told him [this], he said: 'I feel pain for you'." Patriarch Raphael said the Pope accepted an invitation to visit Iraq.[253]

March 2013: In a homily given during his installation as Patriarch of Baghdad of the Chaldeans, Raphael I Sako said: "These past years have been full of events and dangers and still the shadow of fear, anxiety and death is hanging over our people." Calling on Christians to "overcome your fears", the new Patriarch called on Christians not to emigrate. He said: "If emigration continues, God forbid, there will be no more Christians in the Middle East. It will be no more than a distant memory."[254]

March 2013: Iraq only has 57 churches left according to Patriarch Louis Sako of the Chaldean Catholic Church. There were 300 in 2003 before the US-led invasion. He added that the remaining churches are frequent targets of extremists.[255]

April 2013: Patriarch Sako went on what he called a "pilgrimage" to Our Lady of Salvation Cathedral in Baghdad, more than two years after at least 50 people were killed during an Islamist siege during evening Mass. Paying tribute to the dead, whose names appear around the rebuilt church interior, Patriarch Sako described their relics as "precious faith-strengthening treasures". Patriarch Sako said: "I come as a pilgrim to your cathedral, the cathedral of glorious martyrs." Recalling two curates who were among those killed that day on 31st October 2010, Patriarch Sako said: "I knew some of the martyrs of the massacre especially the two

young priests, [Fathers] Waseem and Tahir, who gave an excellent example of service and sacrifice [for the Church]".[256]

June 2013: Gunmen wounded two guards outside St. Mary Assyrian Church, east Baghdad, at around 2am on Tuesday 25th. A guard confronted one of the men, and the gunman opened fire, clipping Raad Mekha, 26, in the leg and hitting Yakoob Zabook, 31, in the stomach. Zabook was still in hospital as of Saturday 29th but was in a stable condition. Fr Martin David said: "The terrorists, when they come, they kill everyone in the room. We didn't have any killings there, only small injuries. We still don't know who did it; it is unknown. We don't know exactly why they came to the church."[257]

June 2013: Stores owned by Assyrian Christians and others were attacked after Islamists ordered them to stop selling alcohol. A few days later, on the evening of the 25th three more Assyrian-owned businesses were bombed in Baghdad's Karada district including Warda Store on Alkarada Street and the Al Samaah Market, both near St. Mary Assyrian Church. Ashur Yonan, an Assyrian, and an unnamed Muslim employee were killed in the explosion at Warda.[258]

# Israel and Palestine

| | Israel | Palestine |
|---|---|---|
| **Total Pop.** | 7.5 million | 4 million |
| **Religions** | Judaism 75%, Islam 20%<br>Christian 2.25%<br>Other 2.75% | Islam 80%, Judaism 12%,<br>Christians 1.25%<br>Other 6.75% |
| **Christians** | 210,000 | |

Instability and conflict in the region – notably the violence between Israel and Gaza in early 2012 – has affected all those living there. For the Christian community, it has encouraged emigration. Bishop William Shomali, Auxiliary Bishop of Jerusalem, said peace was needed to stop the haemorrhaging of Christians: "Peace creates a very positive atmosphere. Without it, there is insecurity and the economic situation becomes precarious."[259] Christian emigration continues, albeit at a slower rate, in the Palestinian Territories where the West Bank Barrier is a major factor. The Barrier is a 420-mile (670km) construct which Israel began building in and around the West Bank in 2002 following a wave of suicide bombings by militants. The barrier affects all Palestinians, restricting movement and creating major economic problems. Christian leaders expressed fears that plans to extend the Barrier through Bethlehem's Beit Jala neighbourhood would accelerate Christian emigration. The plans were approved in April 2013. Most of the land confiscated to build the Barrier in this area has been taken from Christian families.

In Israel there was sporadic anti-Christian aggression. Hard-line ultra-Orthodox Jews, in particular the Yad L'Achim group, targeted Messianic Jews – who believe Jesus is the Son of God – in the environs of Jerusalem, Arad, Beer Sheba and the coastal cities. Militant Jewish settlers in the West Bank disaffected with government policies have also taken out their aggression on religious targets, including church buildings. Many of the vandalised sites were daubed with the phrase "Price Tag" which is used by those objecting to steps to move settlements built without Israeli government permission. Such vandalism was condemned by President Shimon Peres. The Israeli government has also made it harder for non-Israeli priests, religious, and seminarians to get visas. Visas are now valid only for one year instead of two, making it especially difficult for seminarians training for the Latin Patriarchate whose jurisdiction covers Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Jordan and Cyprus, whose students train at the seminary in Beit Jala, near Bethlehem. The visa problem creates special problems for Jordanians who constitute two-thirds of seminarians.

Christians in the Gaza Strip have experienced the increasing Islamisation of society since Hamas took power in 2006. Attacks on Christians by extremists rose –although many of these acts were condemned by Hamas officials, including the 2007 firebombing of Gaza's only Christian bookshop and the murder of its owner Rami Ayyad. In a massively overpopulated region of 1.5 million people – of whom around half are children – there are probably no more than 3,000 Christians left, all of whom have come under pressure to conform to Muslim practices.[260] For example women have been forced to cover their heads in public, police have stopped Christian-owned shops from selling alcohol and clothes shops have been instructed to remove mannequins displaying lingerie.[261]

In the West Bank, Christians have also been subject to pressure from Islamists. The Christian population in the area, once more than 15 percent, is now estimated to be less than two percent.[262] Muslims have been buying up souvenir shops around the Basilica of the Nativity. "In the 1950s, there was only one mosque in Bethlehem," a local woman said, adding: "Today, there are many more, built on purpose near Christian places of worship."[263] Christian vineyard owners have faced pressure to grow olives – a less profitable crop – rather than grapes for wine which they have traditionally produced. Italian journalist Francesca Paci reported that opposition to interfaith marriages between Muslims and Christians has intensified during the period under examination. Consequently couples are not marrying and increasingly babies are abandoned to avoid social stigma.[264]

February 2011: Dr. Maher Ayyad, a Christian surgeon in the Gaza Strip, had a bomb hurled at the car he was travelling in. He was unharmed but the vehicle, which belonged to his brother, was damaged. Following the attack 55-year-old Dr Ayyad received text messages warning him to stop his evangelistic work or face the consequences. The surgeon denied being involved in any such activities.[265]

April 2011: The heads of Christian churches in Jerusalem expressed grave concern over "aggressive" moves by Israeli authorities to impose an "arnona" (property tax) on church buildings and properties. A statement issued by the 13 Christian churches officially recognised by Israel stated that: "It would represent a significant worsening of the conditions of the churches in the Holy Land." They said the "arnona" would "contradict the solemn promises given to the Churches by successive Israeli

governments, most notably confirmed in the wake of the June 1967 war".[266]

June 2011: Bishop Giacinto-Boulos Marcuzzo said the Christian community in Nazareth is in danger of dying out. According to the prelate Nazareth's minority Christians began emigrating more than a decade ago after local Islamists started attempts to build a mosque next to the Basilica of the Annunciation, the city's main church. While tensions over the Church have been largely resolved – Islamists still regularly protest on the proposed site – the bishop said "Our problem is not religious, but it's the political situation of insecurity, of non-peace, of non-justice, of non-equality among the people".[267] General emigration from Nazareth for members of all faiths has been driven by various problems including a lack of jobs, economic stagnation, and a lack of building permits.

June 2011: Yad L'Achim, a hard-line ultra-Orthodox Jewish group, placed leaflets around the home of Messianic Jews Serge and Naama Kogen, 37 and 42 respectively, in Mevasseret Zion, a suburb west of Jerusalem. The same week a full-page advert was taken out in a local newspaper printing the couple's address, and calling for a public protest outside their house, saying the Israeli-born residents were part of a missionary group "targeting" the community. About 20 people demonstrated outside the couple's home, denouncing them over megaphones for around 90 minutes. The protests came after Yad L'Achim lost a legal case against the Kogens and Asher Intrater, leader of the Ahavat Yeshua Congregation, in which they accused them of "proselytizing" minors.[268]

September 2011: Flyers were posted in public places with the addresses and phone numbers – and in some cases photographs – of Messianic Jews in Mevasseret Zion. Asher Intrater said he thought the flyers were "an effort to drive us out of the neighbourhood".[269]

October 2011: At least five tombs were smashed and about 20 others sprayed with graffiti in adjacent Muslim and Christian cemeteries in Jaffa, Tel Aviv, on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. A firebomb was also thrown at a synagogue. No one is sure who the culprits were. Police believe it may have been football hooligans, but some blamed settlers as the graffiti in Hebrew included slogans such as "Death to Arabs" and "Price Tag". Israeli president Shimon Peres condemned the vandalism, saying: "The desecration of graves is a forbidden and criminal act that defames our honour and is contrary to the moral values of Israeli society."[270]

February 2012: Vandals spray-painted "Death to Christians" and "We'll crucify you" on Jerusalem's Baptist Church. Similar graffiti were placed on a Greek Orthodox monastery in the city. It was believed to be the work of Jewish extremists who have vandalised Christian and Muslim holy sites as well as Israeli military equipment to protest against the government's allegedly anti-settler policies.[271]

February 2012: Fr Pierbattista Pizzaballa, custodian of Holy Places in the Holy Land, asked Israel's President Shimon Peres to help end the vandalisation of Christian holy sites. Mr Peres' office said the president was treating the request "very seriously" and that he was working on the matter personally.[272]

April 2012: Two parish priests from the Palestinian Territories, Fr Faysal Hijazeen and Fr Ibrahim Shomali, spoke out against "false allegations regarding Palestinian Christians made in recent weeks by Israeli spokespeople, such as Ambassador Michael Oren". They said Oren and others have overstressed the persecution of Christians by Muslims as the major cause of emigration, when recent studies have shown "that the Israeli occupation and settlement activities are the main reason". They also highlighted the problem of land being taken from Palestinian Christians. [273]

July 2012: Greek Orthodox Archbishop Alexios claimed that five Christians in Gaza were kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam. After Hiba Abu Daoud and her three daughters went missing her husband received a mobile phone message telling him that his wife and daughters had converted. He said his wife experienced intense pressure from Muslim co-workers to convert. The Muslim Scholars' Association in Palestine, a group affiliated with Hamas, denied all claims of forced conversion. The other convertee, Ramez Al-Amash, later stated that he had freely changed religion. Some sources state he did so to marry a Muslim woman.[274]

October 2012: Bishops in the Holy Land condemned ongoing plans to extend the West Bank Barrier through the Cremisan Valley, affecting the livelihoods of 58 families in the predominantly Christian area of Beit Jala and cutting through the grounds of a Salesian monastery and convent – as well as preventing an extension to the Church school, which has already received planning permission. Bishop William Shomali, the Auxiliary Bishop of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, stressed that the key issue is that the barrier will deviate from the Green Line – the boundary between the State of Israel and the Palestinian Territories according to the 1949 armistice agreements. Bishop Shomali said: "If Israel constructs the wall according to the 1949 borders, there will be no problem. It is [Israel's]

right. No one would object. The problem is that the route for [the] Cremisan wall would be on Palestinian land."[275]

March 2013: A local Muslim family in Al-Azaria, Bethany, East Jerusalem began erecting a multi-storey building on land belonging to the Convent of Ss. Lazarus, Martha and Mary. The family claimed ownership of the land which has been held by the Orthodox Church since 1912. Al-Azaria is on the Palestinian side of the Barrier even though it is technically part of East Jerusalem, where property prices have risen sharply. An Orthodox source said: "This development has been extremely distressing for the nuns, who live in difficult circumstances and are isolated from the pockets of Christians who live in Jerusalem and Bethlehem."[276]

April 2013: An Israeli court approved the extension of the West Bank Barrier through the Cremisan Valley, disrupting a religious complex, a school, and livelihoods in Beit Jala. Minor changes were made to the originally proposed route, but it will still surround a convent and primary school on three sides and confiscate most of their land. The decision was appealed to the High Court.[277]

May 2013: The Church of the Dormition in Jerusalem was vandalised with the words "Jesus is a monkey" – translated in some reports as "Christians are monkeys" – and "Havat Maon" scrawled across it. Havat Maon was a West Bank settlement set up without government permission that was dismantled by the Israeli state in late May. [278]

June 2013: Five Christian schools in Gaza faced closure after the Hamas-led government issued an order banning co-educational schools. The order would implement Islamic norms, such as forbidding teachers to instruct members of the opposite sex of more than ten years of age. Fr Faaysal Hjazin said: "This will be a big problem. We hope they will not go through with it, but if they do, we will be in big trouble. We don't have the space and we don't have the money to divide our schools."[279]

June 2013: An Orthodox Christian cemetery in Jaffa was vandalised on the 13th with the words "revenge" and "price tag" spray-painted on several tombstones. A judge's house in the city was also vandalised.[280]

# Laos

| Population | Religions | Christian Population |
|---|---|---|
| 6.5 million | Buddhists 50%<br>Tribal religion 45%<br>Christians 3%<br>Others 2% | 200,000 |

Significant restrictions on Christians continue in spite of some improvements. The progress includes a major reduction in the number of Christians jailed for their faith and shorter average prison sentences for believers. The constitution guarantees religious freedom (article 31), but since 2002 a Prime Ministerial Decree has required official approval for most religious activities, including evangelisation work, printing, building or acquiring places of worship, and contacts with foreign religious groups. Those accused of religious offences can be arrested and held without trial. Christian groups are particularly targeted, often because they are seen as connected to the West. Levels of religious freedom across the country are often dependent upon the individual approach of a local official. Some officials have made serious efforts to uphold religious freedom in the face of local opposition over the period under examination.[281]

The government only recognizes three Christian communities: The Lao Evangelical Church; the Roman Catholic Church; and the Seventh-day Adventists. There are more than 160,000 Protestants in the country, mostly members of the Lao Evangelical Church. The Catholic Church has about 50,000 members, but only has four bishops and 16 priests – including two well beyond the age of retirement. All churches have their affairs scrutinized by the state. The government continued to restrict the activities of the Catholic Church in the northern part of the country where there are only a few small congregations.[282]

In a number of cases, local authorities have tied the right of village residency to participation in traditional animist rituals. These are more than just traditional cultural celebrations and, by participating in these rituals, the Christians would be viewed as making public statements that they are rejecting Christianity and returning to the traditional animist religion. Commenting on one case of this sort, Christian charity Barnabas Fund said authorities "were concerned about people leaving the traditional Lao religion (spirit worship) and embracing what they consider a foreign religion, thus becoming loyal to a power other than the Lao authorities".[283]

January 2011: Pastors Wanna and Yohan were released from Khammouan Prison, Takhet City, having been arrested at gunpoint the previous month

along with nine others on charges of "organising a Christmas celebration without approval" in Nakoon village.[284]

January 2011: The Catholic Church celebrated its first priestly ordination in 40 years in the north of the country. Pierre Buntha Silaphet's ordination had been planned for 12th December 2010 but local officials and the military postponed it on "security grounds". The new priest is an ethnic Khmu, born in Phom Van, Sayaboury province, in northern Laos. More than 1,000 local Catholics attended the ordination.

March 2011: Christian families driven out of Katin village at gunpoint for refusing to give up their faith faced starvation as local authorities destroyed their crops. Having been forced from their homes, the 18 families – around 65 people – were sheltering in a temporary camp. They had an ongoing problem obtaining adequate shelter, water and food – problems with the latter having been exacerbated when the improvised crop fields around their camp were destroyed. Families in the surrounding villages were told not to provide food or other help for the group. Government officials tried to force village elders to accept the Christians back but the elders said that if the believers returned they would shoot them. [285]

June 2011: Fr Raphael Tran Xuan Nhan, a Vietnamese priest based in Laos, described the growing "persecution" in the northern part of the country, especially in Luang Prabang and the border region with Vietnam. In his opinion, the crackdown is the authorities' response to protests in previous weeks by local believers against "ever tighter controls" on their worship.[286]

July 2011: Pastor Seng Aroun of Kon church and three other Christians from Sounya village – where believers have faced persecution since 400 locals converted in 2002 – were arrested in July by provincial authorities and detained at Luang Namthas provincial prison. Authorities ordered all Christians in Sounya village to stop worshipping in private homes.[287]

August 2011: A schoolteacher in Savannakhet province belonging to an unregistered house church was told by village authorities that she could not teach in the local school because she was a Christian. She complained to the district education office who told her to carry on teaching. The school's headmaster then tried to pressure her to sign a document renouncing her faith in order to continue teaching. The village head brought the woman's uncle to the office and together they coerced her to sign the document. [288]

October 2011: A property belonging to a 212-member church in Dongpaiwan village, Saybuly district, Savannakhet province was forcibly confiscated by local authorities and converted into a school. The site, used by the congregation since 1977, contains two buildings and a pond whose fish provided major income for the church. Local village elders had originally approved a new concrete structure, finished in 2010, but after the district commissioner raised objections to it, they claimed approval had never been granted.[289]

February 2012: Bounchan Kanthavong was set free having been arrested in June 1999 and sentenced to 12 years in jail for treason and sedition. According to Christian persecution charity Barnabas Fund his "crimes" were receiving Bible training and sharing his faith with people who came into his clothing shop. He converted around 70 people. [290]

June 2012: Police arrested four people, including two Thai citizens, in Luang Namtha Province for talking about the Bible to a Lao man in a private home. Jonasa Wiwatdamrong, 54, and his brother Phanthakorn, 40, were two of the four who had personal belongings confiscated by the police before being taken to the provincial prison. There were no formal charges and no formal investigation took place. They were released in August.[291]

July 2012: 24-year-old pastor Thong Hak was found dead. Church members believed he had been murdered. The pastor left his village on a Friday to go hunting but did not turn up to preach at church the following Sunday. A search party went into a forest and quickly found his body covered in blood.[292]

August 2012: Mr Bountheung, leader of the Nongpong village house church, was arrested and taken to prison following restrictions by village authorities. He had been summoned to the village headquarters on three different occasions to answer questions about his faith and the 300-strong church he led. At the third meeting Mr Bounteung was given written notice to leave Nongpong village for embracing an "unacceptable" religion. Authorities gave him a week to sell his house and property or have them confiscated.[293]

October 2012: The village elders of Vongseekaew village in Phin district, Savannakhet province demanded that about 50 Christians from 13 families take part in traditional animistic rituals. These included taking an oath and drinking "sacred water" that had been ritually "invoked" by a shaman. During a meeting on or around 4th October the elders said village residents who failed to perform the rituals forfeited their right to continue living there.

The Christians were ordered to leave the village after repeatedly refusing. A few days later, the head of Jutsume sub-district Mr Bounheung and the Jutsume sub-district Community party secretary Mr. Bioungong threatened to tear down the Christian's homes if they continued to refuse to undergo the rituals. Then, around 9th October, the district religious affairs committee, local police and military organised a public meeting where the Phin District chief declared that residents of Vongseekaew could follow any religion including Christianity. On 16th October six Christian families in Allowmai, 4 miles (8km) from Vongseekaew were ordered to participate in the same ceremony to be allowed to remain in the village. On the 19th October all residents from Kengsaiyai village and the surrounding area were summoned to a meeting where they were told to participate in the same ceremony. The 30 or so Christian families refused to participate, despite being told they would lose the right to remain in their villages.[294]

October 2012: Authorities in southern Laos pressured three jailed pastors to take part in traditional animist rituals. Pastor Bounlert, pastor of Alowmai church, Pastor Adang from Kengsainoy, and Pastor Onkaew of Kapang church refused to take part in the ritual, which would indicate a recantation of their Christian Faith. The three pastors insisted to local authorities that they have a constitutional right to be Christian. They were arrested on 11th September 2012 and taken with their hands and feet tied to Phin district jail, being transferred to the prison in Savannakhet Province on the 17th September. They reportedly suffered threats and harassment while in custody. The pastors were arrested with two other unnamed leaders, who were released on the 13th October. Pastors Adang and Onkaew were seriously ill but their families were denied permission to visit them or bring them medicine. Nor were the pastors allowed to go to hospital.[295]

January 2013: Mr Sompeng, the chief of Chumpoy village in Sanamsai District, Attapeu Province, issued a written eviction order to a man named Sakien and his wife, Dong, for converting to Christianity. Denied the right to return to their home, they sought refuge in an unfinished church building (without walls) in Intee village. Sakien was ill and in need of medical treatment. The couple embraced Christianity after seeking prayers for healing from Christians in Intee. They did this after his daughter-in-law reportedly received physical healing for problems following childbirth.[296]

January 2013: Human rights organisation Christian Solidarity Worldwide wrote to the country's president, Choummaly Sayasone, urgently requesting information about Mr Boontheong and his family who disappeared on 3rd July 2004. The man and his wife went missing along

their then seven-year-old son in Luang Namtha Province. Before the family's disappearance, Mr Boontheong had been threatened and imprisoned by the local police because of his faith. Christian Solidarity Worldwide has being trying to resolve the fate of the family since they vanished. Rumours circulating in 2010 suggested that Mr Boontheong was being held in an underground prison.[297]

April 2013: Three Christian pastors in Lao were released from prison after being arrested on 5th February 2013 on charges of "spreading the Christian religion". Pastor Bounma of Alowmai Village Church, Pastor Somkaew of Kengsainoi Village Church – both from Phin district – and Pastor Bounmee of Savet Village Church, Sepon District were held in a high security section of the prison where prisoners' legs are chained together. They were arrested when they took a copy of a Christian DVD about the End Times to a local shop to make three copies. A passing police officer observed the owner of the shop, along with the three pastors, testing one of the DVDs. The police officer contacted his superior Police Lieutenant Khamvee who, accompanied by two deputies, arrested the three pastors and took the owner for questioning. The pastors told police interrogation that they had made three copies made so that they could each view it in their own homes, but the authorities insisted that they were spreading Christianity. Pastor Bounma was reportedly kicked and beaten severely by Lieutenant Khamvee whilst in detention in an attempt to force him to confess.[298]

June 2013: The village chief in Keang Khean, in the Chomphet district of Luang Prabang province told all Christians to leave immediately. In Sanam village the government gave three families an official notice to leave the area following two years of persecution. The 18 members of the Ser, Taam and Thong families have had their papers confiscated since last year.[299]

June 2013: Police threatened violence to 16 Christian families in the Hom district of Vientiane province unless they recanted their faith. Tensions arose when they tried to build a church in their own village. The families had been travelling six miles to their nearest church.[300]

# Maldives

| Population | Religions | Christian Population |
|---|---|---|
| 315,000 | Muslim 99%<br>Other 1% | Unknown |

The country's official tourist website, Visit Maldives, describes the islands as providing "the sunny side of life". However, for Maldives's Christians and other religious minorities, a dark cloud of oppression and persecution hangs over them.[301] Although a popular holiday destination, tourists are oblivious to the repression in a country described as the sixth worst in the world for persecuting Christians.[302]

The Constitution denies citizenship to non-Muslims and prohibits all laws contrary to any "tenet of Islam". Sunni Islam is the only legally permitted faith,[303] but a strict and puritanical form of the religion has taken root, one brought back by students from Islamic universities in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Women increasingly veil their faces and men grow beards, neither of which were traditional practices in the country. The penal code allows for *Shari'a* Hudud punishments – execution, amputation and flogging in cases of theft, sexual crimes, apostasy, and drinking alcohol. In February 2013 a 15-year-old girl was sentenced to 100 lashes and eight months' house arrest for consensual premarital sex.[304] A march in the capital Malé in April 2013 called for the full implementation of *Shari'a.*[305]

Some commentators hoped the election of Mohamed Nasheed as president in 2008 would reverse some of the restrictions on religious freedom in the country but he was forced to resign in February 2012 following protests against his agenda which saw the police and military siding against him.[306]

All Christians of foreign nationality were expelled from the country in 1998 and all known Maldivian Christians were arrested. They were only released following international pressure.[307] Some 80,000 migrant workers – mostly Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and Muslims, from South Asia – make up about a quarter of the country's population, and are prevented from following their religion for all practical purposes. Although migrant workers are officially allowed to practise their religion privately in their living quarters, most migrants are domestic helpers living with their employers, and therefore have no privacy in which to practise their faith. Customs officers search luggage for "un-Islamic" books, CDs, images, and other

religious items. People have even been asked to remove small crosses worn as jewellery.[308]

September 2011: The Religious Unity Regulations made it an offence to preach a religion except Islam, spread a religion other than Islam, and make use of an object that resembles a sign of a non-Islamic religion. It also restricts preachers of Islam to individuals holding a first degree in Islamic education from one of 36 approved institutes around the world and prohibits preaching hatred towards people of non-Islamic religions. Anyone violating the regulation can be sentenced to up to five years in prison or house arrest – or banishment.[309]

September-October 2011: Shijo Kokkattu, a 30-year-old Catholic from India, was imprisoned and subsequently deported for having a Bible and a rosary at his home. Mr Kokkattu had taught at Raafainu School on Raa Atoll for the previous two years. While transferring some data from his USB drive to the school laptop he also copied videos of Catholic songs in the south-Indian Malayalam language and a picture of the Mother of God. Colleagues reported the matter to the police who raided his home. “The videos were in Indian, so I don’t know what they were saying, but the images were Christian,” said head teacher Mohamed Shiraj.[310]

September 2012: Customs officials at Malé Ibrahim Nasir International Airport seized 11 Christian books in the luggage of Jathish Bisvas, a Bangladeshi expatriate who travelled to the Maldives via Sri Lanka. Chief Customs Officer Ahmed Samah said it was highly possible that a Maldivian was behind the illegal smuggling operation because of the quality of the Dhivehi language in the book, adding it was a “very serious case if a Maldivian is behind this.”[311]

# Mali

| Population | Religions | Christian Population |
|---|---|---|
| 15 million | Muslim 87%<br>Tribal religions 70%<br>Christians 3% | 450,000 |

Christians were among those who had most to fear in spring 2012 when northern Mali was overrun by one of the most ferocious Islamist military campaigns of modern times. Al-Qaeda-backed militants imposed hard-line *Shari'a* law with punishments including flogging, amputations and executions. By August that same year, leading Church sources reported that 200,000 Christians from northern Mali had fled to neighbouring Algeria and Mauritania.[312] The numbers were to continue to grow in the months that followed. Reports came in of Christians being hidden by their Muslim neighbours and militant groups attacking churches. Islamists were said to be "hunting down priests and religious".[313] On the wall of one place of worship was a message daubed "Allah is the only one" and inside the building bullets had been scattered across the floor.[314] Mainstream Muslims also suffered. Seven religious monuments and several tombs of prominent Muslims with destroyed with Islamists condemning them as idolatry.[315] The UN said internal displacement figures had topped 250,000, with one imam stating: "We are all victims of these terrorists. We are all Malians and we all fled together. When my family came here, we brought with us a Christian family and we loaned them some of our traditional clothes so the terrorists would let them travel without problems."[316]

Such cooperation between the moderate Muslim majority and the country's Christians was to be expected in a country where the constitution, revised in 1999, had established freedom of thought, conscience, religion and worship (Article 4), and which defined Mali as a secular republic (Article 25), one that prohibits religious confessional political parties (Article 28). Islamists had every intention of ending Mali's long tradition of religious coexistence. They were able to capitalise on widespread disenchantment in a country described as one of the poorest in the world.[317] In the summer of 2012, extremist group Ansar al-Din and its ally Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb turned on Tuareg rebels who had seized northern Mali a few months earlier and declared independence. And when in December 2012 Mali's Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra resigned, reportedly under pressure from his military high command, Africa experts issued warnings of the country becoming a "failed state" like

Somalia, a nation overrun by Islamists. Calls for international intervention mounted as Islamist fighters captured the central town of Konna and began planning an assault on the capital. When in January 2013, President Traore appealed for help from France, Mali's former colonial master responded rapidly, capturing Gao and Timbuktu. By the end of January, Kidal, the last major rebel-held town fell. Following a withdrawal of French troops in April 2013 and a US$4 (£2.5) billion international pledge to rebuild Mali, the country's government signed a deal with nationalist rebels paving the way for elections.

But the Islamist threat remained and the army refused to allow Christian "pastoral workers" to return to certain parts of the country, saying they were at particular risk of being kidnapped by terrorists. And reports in summer 2013 stated there were no Christians left in the north or east of the country, with little prospect of them returning in the near future.

June 2011: Nine seminarians were ordained deacons at the cathedral of Barnako by Jean Baptiste Tiama, Bishop of Sikasso and President of the Bishops' Conference of Mali. The ordinations were seen as a sign of the growth of the Church in a country where Christianity is a minority religion but has a history of cooperation with Muslim neighbours.[318]

April 2012: The director of a Catholic charity in Gao, in northern Mali, described how Islamists invading the city sought to kill priests, chase Christians away and destroy their churches. Father Jean-Jacques of Caritas Gao said that the charity's office was destroyed but the organisation was able to continue its relief work. He said: "Caritas staff fled Gao on Saturday evening [March 31st] after learning that some Islamic rebel groups were hunting priests and religious to kill them… We have also received calls from the small Catholic community in Gao. They are now hiding, fearing for their lives. There are about 200 Catholics in Gao." He went on to report that the church near the Caritas office was destroyed.[319]

October 2012: White Father Laurent Balas told ACN how "in the north of Mali, all Christians were forced to flee". He said that many Christians had found refuge in the south and in camps in neighbouring countries.[320]

January 2013: Writing to ACN after the liberation of the city of Diabally, Father Zacharie Sorgho, parish priest in Nioro du Sahel, north-west Mali, described how fundamentalists had "imposed laws and spread terror among the northern people by amputating hands, giving strokes of the

lash, committing sexual violence against women and girls." He added that the extremists "really want to impose *Shari'a* throughout the country."[321]

January 2013: Pastor Daniel Konate prepared for his first Sunday service following Diabally's liberation, describing how during the occupation his church had been used as a military base. He found graffiti on the church wall: "Allah is the only one". He said that during the occupation he and his family had fled to a village 12 miles (20km) away. He added that his church looks like an ordinary building and that local people must have told the Islamists that it was a place of Christian worship.[322]

January 2013: During the height of the Islamist power-grab in northern Mali, Catholic Bishop Augustin Traore of Segu described how his diocese lay in the path of the advancing extremist fighters. He said: "Although our churches are still intact, people are becoming afraid to enter them. Our entire Catholic culture will clearly be in danger if this conflict drags on." He warned that if the conflict were not halted, churches would be destroyed. He added that relations between Christians and the Muslim majority remained "good at a local level" and that people of all faiths were "vigorously committed" to maintaining the country's secular character.[323]

April 2013: Fr Edmond Dembele, Secretary of the Bishops' Conference of Mali, highlighted the enormous struggle to rebuild people's lives and renew the country's infrastructure following the trail of destruction left behind by retreating Islamist fighters. Although security had improved, the majority of refugees and internally displaced people remained in reception centres. He added that aid was not sufficient, given the vast numbers. In the north, unexploded ordnance meant it was dangerous for people to return to farming. "The harvest begins around May and without adequate clearance and remediation, it is likely to be compromised."[324]

May 2013: A Christian aid and advocacy group described setting up "several safe houses" in southern Mali, where Muslim Christian converts were forced to flee their communities "due to serious life-endangering threats made by members of their own Muslim families. When they fled from militants in the north, most left their possessions behind, including their Bibles."[325]

# Nigeria

| Population | Religions | Christian Population |
|---|---|---|
| 158 million | Muslim 40%<br>Christian 40%<br>Local religions 20% | 63 million |

In a statement to ACN staff visiting conflict-ridden north-east Nigeria, Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama of Jos, President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, said: "In north-east Nigeria, they can burn our churches, they can attack our homes but they cannot destroy our spirit. We have suffered persecution, discrimination and harassment but they can never take away our faith and our hope in the risen Lord." The May 2013 ACN trip, taking in visits to a dozen or more churches damaged or destroyed by persecution, came soon after a religious freedom watchdog produced research showing that in the year to October 2012, 791 of the 1,201 killings of Christians worldwide took place in Nigeria.[326] Nigeria was the most dangerous place in the world for Christians. The reports coincided with statements made by a priest from Borno state, north-east Nigeria, claiming that 50 of the 52 Catholic churches in the region had been forcibly abandoned, damaged or destroyed. At the same time, the Nigerian Catholic Bishops' Conference stated that since 2007 more than 700 churches had been attacked. In spite of heightened security – notably armed guards outside each church – suicide bomb attacks on churches packed with Sunday worshippers continued through 2013. The violence followed two years of vicious attacks against Christians, with attacks on Catholic cathedrals such as Zaria and Bauchi. The violence peaked after the disputed presidential elections of April 2011 when, according to the Christian Association of Nigeria, 430 churches were destroyed or damaged. When Goodluck Jonathan a Christian from the south, triumphed against Mahammadu Buhari, a Muslim from the north, the ensuing conflict left 800 people dead and 65,000 people forced out of their homes.

In many if not most cases, attacks against Christians have been carried out by the Islamist terror group Boko Haram, which is not satisfied by the imposition of *Shari'a* law in 12 of the country's 36 states, where Muslims are very numerous. The group demands 'pure' Islamic rule and wants to overthrow secular rule and stamp out Christian influence. Angered by reports of Christians carrying out reprisal attacks against Muslims and mosques in June 2012, a Boko Haram spokesman said: "The Nigerian state and Christians are our enemies and we will be launching attacks on the Nigerian state and its security apparatus as well as churches until we

achieve our goal of establishing an Islamic state."[327] It followed a March 2012 Boko Haram declaration of a "war on Christians" aimed at eliminating them from parts of the country: "We will create so much effort to have an Islamic state that Christians will not be able to stay." An ACN fact-finding trip in May 2013 revealed how the violence had prompted mass migration of Christians away from parts of the north, especially among certain groups, notably Igbo traders.

Boko Haram's violence makes plain that Christians are by no means the group's only target. In many cases, the main focus is the government. Attacks on state banks, court houses, buildings and security apparatus continued. In response, in May 2013, President Goodluck Jonathan declared a state of emergency in three states in the north-east, paving the way for the Nigerian military to flood the area. Religious freedom observers repeatedly underlined the anti-Christian nature of much of Boko Haram's violence. One stated: "While other causes factor into the violence in areas of conflict, religion is a significant catalyst and is often misused by politicians, religious leaders and others for political gain."[328] While denouncing reprisals by Christian groups, Church leaders frequently asserted that the violence was primarily political rather than religious and that ethnic, tribal and economic factors were predominant.

Church leaders and religious freedom observers denounced the government's efforts to crackdown on Boko Haram and other militant groups. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom's 2013 report stated: "The government continued to fail to prosecute religiously motivated violence."[329] In April 2012, Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, soon to be made a Cardinal, denounced the government for failing "to muster the political will" to deal with the crisis, adding: "We have a weak government that has put together a whole lot of compromises that mean that the action that should be taking place is not taking place".[330] All the while, pressure grows on the government to enforce law and order in a region of the country increasingly "teetering on the brink", to use Archbishop Kaigama's phrase, with potentially devastating consequences, perhaps especially to the country's Christians.[331]

January 2011: Six villages near Jos in Plateau State were attacked between midnight and 3am by militants. Five people were killed. Following the attacks on Nding Jok, Lo Hala, Wereh Fan and Ratatis in the Barkin Ladi local government area, police took up to two hours to arrive. State

security arrested 29 men thought to be involved in the attacks, who were heavily armed with automatic weapons, axes and machetes. Security forces also allegedly found 25 automatic weapons in a nearby mosque.[332]

January 2011: A police officer from Abuja led militants on a killing spree in the predominantly Christian Barkin Ladi Government Area just outside Jos. 14 people in four villages were killed.[333]

January 2011: Special Task Force troopers charged with maintaining order in Jos were accused of sectarian bias and of shooting at innocent Christians. Thousands of Christian women held a protest march in Jos demanding their removal.[334]

March 2011: Two young Muslim men were killed when the bomb they were taking to the Church of Christ in Nigeria in Nasarawa Gwom exploded prematurely. One member of the congregation, Moses Samuel, was injured by the explosion and admitted to Jos University Hospital. Nine Christians were attacked with knives the same morning at Duala Junction, a man and two women were killed while the others were treated at the same hospital as Mr Samuel.[335]

April 2011: Up to 600 people were killed and 288 churches were burned down in the country's northern states in the week following the election of Christian Goodluck Jonathan as the president of Nigeria. Some Muslim groups claimed the election was rigged.[336]

May 2011: A pastor's wife and three of his children were among 17 people killed when extremists attacked Kurum village, Bauchi State. Hearing the cries of his daughter Sum, Pastor James Musa Rike ran to her, only to find that a serious machete wound to her stomach had splayed out her intestines. She told her father the militants cried "See how your Jesus will save you" as they attacked, but the girl replied that Jesus had already saved her.[337]

June 2011: Five people died when churches and police stations in Maiduguri were targeted by Islamist militants: two bystanders were caught up in an explosion when a bomb thrown at St Patrick's Church fell short of its target; and three militants were killed in a gun battle with police.[338]

July 2011: Christians in northern Nigeria's Borno state, already forced to abandon religious services as a result of attacks by Islamic sect Boko Haram, were bracing themselves for a massive assault commemorating the death of the extremist group's leader at the end of the month. Christians were reported to be "streaming" out of Maiduguri, in north-east

Nigeria, where some of worst-hit churches are located. Churches were reported to be shutting down after many faithful were killed. Witnesses said most church buildings in the Maiduguri area were "shuttered" and guarded by state security. Some clergy bold enough to re-open their churches changed the times of worship services in a bid to outmanoeuvre militants working on the basis that most Sunday services start at 10am.[339]

August 2011: Armed extremists from Niger joined Islamists in Kaduna State to attack Christians. On the 21st two people were killed – 10-year-old Fidelis Ishaku and security guard Zaman Kaki – when the black-uniformed extremists entered Fadiya Bakut village and started shooting into the houses. On the 24th Islamists also attacked the villages of Angwan Yaro and Angwan Yuli, but fled when inhabitants defended themselves.[340]

August/September 2011: More than 100 Christians were killed in a series of attacks in Plateau State in which the military were implicated. Survivors of the attack on Vwang Kogot village – which saw 14 deaths including a pregnant woman – said attackers were assisted by men in Nigerian Army uniforms. State Governor Jonah Jang said: "I am convinced that the armed forces are being polluted with the religious crisis in this country" and requested their immediate withdrawal.[341]

September 2011: Nine people, including seven children, were killed when gunmen attacked the mainly Christian village of Barkin Ladi, Plateau State. The attacks came during a fortnight of violence when more than 100 people were killed. The conflict between Fulani herdsmen and ethnic Beroms, who are mostly Christian, was believed to be politically motivated. Hausa-speaking Muslims are regarded as supporters of the opposition, while Christians are thought to support the ruling People's Democratic Party. Catholic Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama and Muslim leader Sheikh Sani Yahaya Jingir appealed for the violence to end. [342]

December 2011/January 2012: President Goodluck Jonathan declared a state of emergency in parts of the country following attacks by Boko Haram. The measure was enforced in four states in the north-east, the centre and the west of the country, with the president vowing to "crush" Boko Haram and closing international borders in the process. It followed a spate of violence climaxing in a number of attacks on Christmas Day, including churches in the cities of Madalla, Jos, Kano, Damaturu and Gadaka. In one attack that day, 44 people were killed and more than 80 others were injured when extremists targeted Mass-goers at St Theresa's Catholic Church in Madalla, near the Nigerian capital, Abuja. Most of the

dead were very young and included four-year-old Emmanuel Dike, who was killed alongside his father, his brother and his sister. Also dead were Chiemerie Nwachukwu, an eight-month-old baby who was killed alongside his mother. Their bishop, Martin Igwe Uzoukwu of Minna, told ACN: "Our people have suffered so much but our response should not be one of anger but one seeking peace and justice." [343]

January 2012: A fresh wave of violence against churchgoers left 27 people dead. The religiously-motivated massacres, three in as many days, targeted Christians in Mubi and Gombe, both towns in the north-east where President Goodluck Jonathan declared a state of emergency the week before. Some 17 other deaths have been reported in other regions. At least nine people died and 19 were injured in a shooting at an Evangelical church in Gombe city in the north-east. Pastor Johnson Jauro told reporters that gunmen burst into his church killing people including his wife. He said: "The attackers started shooting sporadically. They shot through the window of the church. Many members who attended the church service were also injured." Boko Haram claimed responsibility for the attack, carried out by extremists who rushed over from a nearby mosque. Up to 20 people died in Mubi, Adamawa state as gunmen opened fire in a town hall where Christian traders were meeting, holding prayers.[344]

January 2012**:** Christians in the region of Bauchi city, north-east Nigeria, suffered a series of attacks. In the town of Tafawa Balewa, Christians travelling to Sunday services came under fire, the Evangelical church was destroyed in a bombing which killed at least eight people and left many injured, and St Paul's Anglican Secondary School was partially destroyed. In Bauchi city, a reported bomb attack at Our Lady of Loreto Catholic Church caused minor damage, with no casualties.[345]

February 2012**:** Five were injured by a car bomb just as Sunday morning worship got underway at Christ Embassy Church, in Suleja, near the capital, Abuja. The bomb was planted in a car parked directly in front of the church and observers later said that it was also intended to cause damage to another Protestant church, also nearby. Boko Haram was strongly suspected.[346]

February 2012: Boko Haram claimed responsibility for a suicide bomb attack during Sunday service at a Protestant church in Jos. At least three people died, including a young girl, and 50 others were wounded. The media quoted witnesses saying a car "packed with explosives" rammed the gate of a perimeter fence at the church and exploded a few yards from

a wall of the 800-seat church. Boko Haram spokesman Abdul Qaqa told reporters: "We attacked simply because it's a church and we can decide to attack any other church. We have just started."[347]

March 2012: Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama said the attacks on Christian communities would not succeed in driving Christians from the north of the country. He said: "Evil has taken place but it will not triumph. This tragedy will not erase Christianity… He called on Christians not to seek vengeance. Quoting St Paul in the Bible, he added: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God… We call for calm not because we are cowards but because of the reason that killing is irrational and criminal." He made his remarks while comforting people grieving after a bomb attack at St Finbarr's Catholic Church, in Rayfield in his Archdiocese of Jos. Up to a dozen people died and 42 others were injured when early morning Mass at St Finbarr's was interrupted by a suicide car bomb attack. Boko Haram later claimed responsibility. The attack sparked violence between Christians and Muslims leading to more deaths.[348]

March 2012: Islamist group Boko Haram declared a "war on Christians" saying that it would launch a series of "coordinated" attacks in order to "eradicate Christians from certain parts of the country". A Nigerian news website quoted an unnamed spokesman for Boko Haram as saying: "We will create so much effort to end the Christian presence in our push to have a proper Islamic state that Christians won't be able to stay." Human rights group International Christian Concern's Jonathan Racho described the reports as "alarming". He added: "Since Christmas, Boko Haram has martyred about 100 Christians in northern Nigeria. They think they have not met their goal for eradicating Christians. They are prepared for more bloodshed… I urge Christians around the world to contact their governments and ask them to get Nigeria to protect its citizens."[349]

April 2012: Up to 40 people died and at least 30 were injured after a suicide bomber detonated explosives in Kaduna city after being refused entry to a nearby church where an Easter Day service was taking place. Security guards at the gates of the First Evangelical Church, in Gwari Rd, denied access to a man driving a car packed with improvised explosives. The man then drove off and detonated the bomb at a nearby hotel, close to an evangelical church and a third church, some of whose windows were smashed by the explosion. An estimated 60 buildings within a 550-yard (500-metre) radius of the blast were severely damaged and eight cars and several commercial vehicles were burnt. In a message of condolence to people grieving lost loved ones, Church leaders went on to praise the

quick thinking and bravery of the security staff who turned the bombers away from the evangelical church. Nobody has claimed responsibility for the bomb blast but commentators have pointed out that it was very similar to a series of attacks by Islamist group Boko Haram.[350]

September 2012: A suicide bomber, who was a suspected Boko Haram member, was among five people killed in an attack at St John's Catholic Cathedral, in Bauchi, capital of Bauchi state. The blast took place at 9am as Mass-goers were leaving the cathedral. Bystanders said that the bomber had earlier tried to gain entry into the cathedral but was prevented by church security. Hence, he detonated the blast in the car park outside the cathedral.[351]

October 2012: Suicide bomb attack during morning Mass at St Rita's Catholic Church, Kaduna, in the north of the city, left four people dead and 160 injured. Among the dead were three members of the choir who were closest to the centre of the blast, which as well as badly damaging the church, completely demolished the Shrine to Our Lady of Fatima outside.[352]

May 2013: Revd Faye Pama Musa, a Pentecostal minister and secretary of the ecumenical Christian Association of Nigeria in Borno State, was shot dead near his home in Maiduguri on 14th. Boko Haram was suspected.[353]

June 2013: Four churches were burned in an attack, apparently carried out by Boko Haram, in Borno State, a few weeks after President Goodluck Jonathan declared a State of Emergency in the region. Church leaders said details of the attacks were scarce as communications with the area affected had been cut off.[354]

July 2013: Christians in northern Nigeria expressed alarm at the growing "phenomenon" of Christian girls under the age of 18 being abducted and forced to convert to Islam. The north Nigeria branch of the Christian Association of Nigeria reported five such cases, which it was taking up on behalf of the girls and the families. They went on to complain of police in action. Daniel Babayi, secretary of the Christian Association of Nigeria, said: "When we report a case to the police, the officers respond that they cannot do anything. Sometimes we believe they are complicit." A Boko Haram statement read: "Kidnapping Christian women is part of the new efforts to attack Christians and force them to leave the north."[355]

August 2013: Islamist extremists were accused of cutting the throats of 44 villagers during a raid on Dumba village in Borno State, north-east Nigeria.

According to an official from the National Emergency Management Agency, the attackers gouged out eyes of several survivors.[356]

September 2013: Herdsmen from the predominantly Muslim Fulani tribe joined with soldiers in a raid on Gura Dabwam village, near Jos on Tuesday 3rd. During the raid, which started around 10pm, Dauda Dalyop and his two sons, Bitrus (15) and Daniel (17) were killed. His wife, Kangyang, was critically injured, while their five-year-son son, Dantong, survived unscathed. Musa Pam, Dauda Dunlop's uncle, said: "We can authoritatively tell you that these attackers are Fulani herdsmen, and they carried out this attack in collaboration with some Muslim soldiers. Dauda Dalyop's house is at the extreme end of the western part of this village as you can see, and the attackers used the hills at this end to gain access to his house."[357]

September 2013: Christian leaders in Borno State criticised plans to demolish 25 church-owned buildings, including schools, to make way for a government housing project. Rev'd Musa Asake, national general secretary of the Christian Association of Nigeria, said: "We have seen that eviction notice from the Borno State government – we are all Nigerians, and there are other places where the state government can develop. The areas being earmarked for demolition are already developed with churches and schools. We have enough problems at hand, and we don't want to add another problem. Christians have suffered enough in Borno state."[358]

# North Korea

| Population | Religions | Christians |
|---|---|---|
| 24 million | Atheist 70%, New religions 13%, Animist 13%<br>Christian 2%, Other 2% | 480,000 |

The succession of Kim Jong-un as Supreme Leader following the death of his father, Kim Jong-il, in December 2011, did little to change the human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea). "North Korea remains one of the world's most repressive regimes, where severe religious freedom abuses continue," according to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom.[359] The state continues to discriminate against and harass those involved in both authorised and unauthorised religious activity. Believers risk arrest, torture, and possibly even execution.[360] It has been suggested that at least 25 percent of Christians are interned in labour camps.[361] People who flee North Korea are described as "confirming suspicions that the nation is the worst persecutor of Christians".[362]

Although North Korea's constitution provides for "freedom of religious belief", there is essentially no freedom of practice or conscience. Officially an atheist state, the North Korea government propagates a nationalist ideology based upon the cult of personality surrounding Kim Il-sung and his son, Kim Jong-il.[363] All citizens not adhering to this ideological system face severe fines and penalties. However, in 1988, the government created religious federations for Buddhists, Chondokyists (followers of a syncretic belief system largely based on Confucianism), Protestants and Catholics, similar to the patriotic associations in China. These federations have built a Catholic church and two Protestant churches in the capital, Pyongyang. The Protestant churches are lay led and there are no Catholic clerics in North Korea, but visiting priests occasionally say Mass. Since 2006 there has been a Russian Orthodox church in the capital. Kim Jong-il ordered the church be built after a visit to Russia in 2002. Nothing is known about churches elsewhere. It has been suggested that the capital's churches "exist primarily as showpieces for foreign visitors".[364] Defectors have stated that the federations are led by party loyalists who maintain churches as both cultural and tourist attractions, and direct assistance programmes from humanitarian organisations.[365]

Official figures state there are 3,000 Catholics in the country, but Fr Lee Eun-hyung, an expert on North Korea, said: "There are old documents

which show that there were about 50,000 Catholics living in the north before the division of the country. We suspect that after the long period of persecution there are still about 10,000 people who will remember in their hearts their Catholic faith." The Vatican has declared the three North Korean dioceses – Pyongyang, Hamhung and Chunchon – to be vacant sees, under the administration of South Korean diocesan bishops appointed by Rome. In 2012 the Vatican still listed Francis Hong Yong-ho as Bishop of Pyongyang, but notes he is missing.[366] He has not been seen since 10th March 1962, and if still alive he would be well over 100. However, the Vatican has stated that it "cannot be excluded that he may still be a prisoner in some re-education camp".[367] Since the communist regime began in 1953, 300,000 Christians from various denominations have disappeared. Nothing is known about the priests and nuns who were in North Korea at that time – they are generally assumed to be dead.

The North Korean government claims that there are 500 officially approved house churches in the country. South Korean academics report those participating are from families who were Christians before 1950 and are therefore allowed to gather for worship under the law, albeit without leaders or religious materials.[368] However, as unofficial religious activity in North Korea increases so it appears does the regime's attempts to halt its spread. A leading organisation monitoring religious freedom said: "There is first-hand evidence that police and security agency officers… infiltrate Protestant churches in China [which may have links with Korean Christians] and sometimes set up fake prayer meetings in North Korea to catch worshippers."[369] 2009 investigations by Human Rights Watch and the UN found that people caught praying – especially if it involved foreign organisations – were likely to be executed. Prisoners in labour camps are subject to torture, murder, rape, medical experimentation, forced labour, forced abortion and execution. Religious detainees routinely receive harsher treatment.[370]

June 2011 Sixty-year-old Jun Young-Su, a naturalized citizen of the United States, was released having been imprisoned on charges of proselytizing while in North Korea. The US envoy for North Korean human rights, Robert King, escorted the man out of the country.[371]

December 2011 A state-run website described the lighting up of a Christmas-tree-like tower in South Korea near the border of the two countries as a form of "psychological warfare". North Korea warned South

Korea of "unexpected consequences" if it lighted up the 100 foot (30m) high Christmas tree-shaped tower on a hill two miles (3km) from the border. Despite the warnings, politicians and celebrities attended a ceremony for the switching on of the lights on 22nd December. Seoul's annual tradition of lighting up a Christmas tree tower was suspended in 2003 following a warming of ties, but resumed in 2010.[372]

January 2012 Christian charity Release International presented a 48,000 signature petition, calling for religious freedom, to the North Korean embassy in London. The petition followed a staged funeral procession and prayer vigil, which organisers said symbolized the death of freedom in the country.[373]

January 2012 It was reported that Christian churches faced increased persecution following the death of Kim Jong-il. Thomas Kim, executive director of Cornerstone Ministries, which works with churches in North Korea, said: "It's been very difficult for the last month and I think it's going to continue." Mr Kim suggested that problems were caused by the desire for a smooth transition, after Kim Jong-il's death.[374]

November 2012: Kenneth Bae, an ethnic Korean who is a naturalized American citizen, was arrested in Rason City (formerly Rajin) while leading a tour group of five Europeans. In May 2013 the government-run Korean Central News Agency announced that the Christian tour guide had been sentenced to 15 years' hard labour for "committing crimes aimed at toppling the Democratic People's Republic of Korea with hostility towards it".[375]

December 2012: Reports suggest a growth in the number of spies in China searching for human rights activists and Christians helping North Korean refugees. Jerry Dykstra of Open Doors said: "Christians who escape to China from North Korea are hunted down and expatriated to their country where they face prison and often death."[376] According to eyewitnesses, asylum-seekers repatriated from China are interrogated about religion and those suspected of having distributed religious literature or having connections with South-Korean religious groups are mistreated and imprisoned.[377]

January 2013: Two North Korean Christians were killed: one was shot at the border while travelling to a Bible training event in China and the other died in a prison camp. The second victim had become a Christian in China and then returned to North Korea, but authorities found out about his faith and sent him to prison. According to Christian charity Open Doors "He was terribly tortured because of his faith. He was also forced to do heavy

labour. Before his return to North Korea, he was baptised and willing to deal with all the hardships he had to face. We never tell people to go back to North Korea, but he was happy to. We are devastated to hear about these murders. We know Christians die for their faith almost every day in North Korea, but it is still hard to deal with."[378]

May 2013: In an interview with Aid to the Church in Need, Fr Lee Eun-hyung, based in Seoul, South Korea, spoke of encountering Catholics among refugees from North Korea to whom he provided humanitarian aid, although it was "very rare". He said: "They were baptised before the country was divided. They were still able to remember their baptism even though it was 60 years in the past. Some of them still remembered their catechumenate and the prayers they said to prepare for baptism. They practised their faith in secret." Fr Lee underlined the difficulties of saying Mass in the country. He said: "The North Korean authorities told me it was strictly forbidden for me [to say Mass] and those working with me to contact the country's citizens personally".

# Pakistan

| Population | Religions | Christian Pop. |
|---|---|---|
| 175 million | Muslim 95%, Hindu 1.5%<br>Christian 1.5%<br>Other 2% | 2.5 million |

Increasing international concern about a growing climate of religious intolerance in Pakistan came to a head with the case against a young Christian girl, Rimsha Masih, who was at risk of being sentenced to death for blasphemy. Not only was it a trumped-up charge, but her age and mental disabilities meant the case symbolised a fear that the country was now at risk of dispensing with its basic commitment to freedom and justice. 14-year-old Rimsha, from the capital, Islamabad, was accused of burning texts containing verses of the *Qur'an.* Under 295 B&C of the Penal Code, known as the Blasphemy Laws, dishonouring the Prophet is punishable by death and disrespect to the *Qur'an* can incur life imprisonment. The incident in the summer of 2012, which concluded with one of Rimsha Masih's accusers being found guilty of planting the desecrated texts, was the latest in a series of more than 1,000 blasphemy cases since the mid-1980s when the laws were introduced. Other minorities suffer under these laws and most charges are brought against Muslims from the minority Shia group and Ahmadis (adherents of a minority Islamic religious movement).[379]

The campaign to change the blasphemy laws suffered a number of blows in early 2011. Not only did politician Sherry Rehman abandon her attempts to remove the death sentence for insulting the Prophet Mohammad from the law – after failing to receive support from her own party, facing a 40,000 strong rally opposing the change, and receiving numerous death threats[380] – but also two leading politicians who criticised the laws and spoke out against associated mob violence were murdered: Salman Taseer, Governor of the Punjab, and Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's federal minister for minorities and the only Christian in the cabinet. Both men's struggle for greater tolerance at all levels in public life centred on 45-year-old Asia Bibi, who in November 2010 became the first woman in Pakistan to be sentenced to death for blasphemy. The Christian mother of five was arrested because of verbal insults she is alleged to have made against the prophet Mohammed.

While Asia Bibi still remains in jail with the death sentence hanging over her head, reports continue to come in of violations against religious minorities – churches attacked, Christians and others dying in suspicious circumstances, and illegal confiscation of property owned by minority groups. Many of these incidents take place in the context of blasphemy law allegations, the laws being invoked by people with a personal vendetta against a particular individual or group of people. Accusations against alleged blasphemers are often false or motivated by petty interests, encouraging mobs to meet out rough justice without reference to the law. Since 2001 at least 50 Christians have been killed by mob violence after the blasphemy laws were invoked as a pretext.

When asked, authorities have provided security for celebrations at major churches during periods of unrest. However there have also been criticisms of inaction. Christian schools in several areas of Pakistan were closed on Monday 9th March 2013 in a protest for better protection following a 3,000 strong mob torching more than 100 Christian homes in Lahore's Joseph Colony. The Catholic Church serves the country through numerous hospitals and schools, which cater for Christian and non-Christians students alike. Bishop Sebastian Shaw of Lahore said, "Missionary schools of Lahore will remain closed on Monday on account of massacre in Joseph colony". Police in Multan deployed officers to protect sensitive Christian places including churches and schools.[381]

Women from religious minorities are more likely to experience sexual harassment or be raped because of their lower social status – which is due to both their religion and their gender.[382] According to Fr Jill John the rape of Christian women in Punjab has become "common practice".[383] It is estimated that at least 300 Christian women – including minors – are kidnapped, often sexually abused, and forced to convert to Islam every year.[384] This number includes 18-year-old Mariah Manisha, a Catholic girl from Khushpur, who was killed in November 2011 by her Muslim kidnapper. Fr Zafal Iqbal told Fides: "[T]he girl resisted. She did not want to convert to Islam, and she did not marry the man, who killed her for this. She is a martyr."[385] Peter Jacob, of the Catholic Church's National Commission for Justice and Peace, said "[T]he number of attacks against women in Pakistan is four times higher than the cases that [are] reported" and many crimes "based on sex pass in silence".[386]

February 2011: Christian man Imran Masih, 24, was found dead in a cattle shed beside a farmhouse owned by his employer, Chaudhry Maqsood Cheema. Mr Cheema claimed that Mr Masih had hanged himself, but lawyers, acting for Mr Masih's family, said his injuries were inconsistent with hanging. Police only investigated after Christians protested by blocking the village's main road. Relatives claim Mr Cheema had Mr Masih killed for taking a day off without permission.[387]

March 2011: St Thomas' Catholic Church, Wah Cantt, 27 miles (45 km) from Islamabad, became the third church in Pakistan to be attacked in a week following outrage at the burning of the *Qur'an* by Pastor Wayne Sapp under the supervision of controversial preacher, Terry Jones in the US. Also attacked was the Salvation Army church in Hoor Camp, Hyderabad where a group of youths opened fire on a prayer meeting, killing two men. St Thomas' Church parish priest Father Yousaf said: "Although the Catholic Church has officially condemned the [burning of the *Qur'an*] and we have also displayed a banner outside our church condemning the incident, still the innocent people are facing the consequences."[388]

April 2011: Protestant clergyman, Rev Ashraf Paul, 55, and his family were driving in Hamza town near Lahore when two men on motorbikes opened fire on the vehicle. Mr Paul's 24-year-old son, Sarfaz, was taken to Mayo Hospital, Lahore, where doctors removed three bullets, from his jaw, waist and groin area. Mr Paul had earlier received threats from Islamist group Tahreek-e-Ghazi Bin Shaheed to stop evangelising and demands for money but he refused to pay.[389]

April 2011: Sehar Naz, a 24-year-old Christian woman, was abducted and raped by a man who claimed to be a police officer. The sexual assaults were carried out in Lahore and Faisalabad over four days before Sehar was left at Faisalabad Railway Station.[390]

May 2011: Christian road sweeper Abbas Masih, 36, was was murdered for not picking up rubbish soon enough. He was cleaning streets in the Pir Maki area of Lahore on the 21st when florist Muhammad Imran told him to pick up floral debris from the front of the shop. Mr Masih said that he would after he finished sweeping to the end of the street. Mr Imran insisted he picked it up immediately, called him a Chuhra – meaning lower cast or "untouchable" in Punjabi – and took out a knife used at the flower shop which he thrust into Mr Masih's heart. Officers at Lower Mall police station only registered an FIR and after Christian leaders protested.[391]

May 2011: Armed attackers disrupted the Sunday service of a Numseoul Presbyterian Church in Lakhoki Kahna, just outside Lahore on Sunday

29th. Muhammad Shoaib (nephew of former Punjab Assembly Member Mansha Sindhu) entered the church with four armed men and started cursing the congregation. They smashed a glass communion table and desecrated Bibles and a cross. Police requested that the Christians reconcile with Mr Shoaib, when they tried to register an incident. After an hour-long negotiation between local officials and Christian representatives, it was agreed Mr Shoaib would publicly apologise.[392]

June 2011: At least 10 Christian families in a village in the Punjab Province fled their homes after an attempt to force an eight-year-old boy to convert to Islam turned ugly. Little Ihtesham (known as Sunny) Masih, who lived with his family in Khanewal district's Mian Channu area, met Muslim boys from a nearby religious school while on an errand to fetch ice. The boy's great uncle Yousaf Masih said the boys asked Sunny to recite the *Kalma*, Islam's proclamation of Mohammed as Prophet, but Sunny refused. The boys began hitting Sunny and only stopped when his uncle, Dildar Masih, passed by and intervened. The uncle rebuked the boys for trying to force his nephew to convert. A little while later, Dildar Masih was accused of blasphemy, and 500 people besieged his home. Dildar was taken to a police station but within 30 minutes 2,000 Muslims were outside demanding he be handed over to them. Under pressure, police filed a blasphemy case against Dildar. Unsatisfied, Muslim clerics urged people to "take revenge" via their mosque's loudspeakers the following day."[393]

July 2011: Three influential local Muslim men tried to seize the Christian Hospital in Taxila, roughly 19 miles (32 km) from Islamabad. On Saturday 2nd Malik Nur Muhammad, Malik Riaz and Malik Abdul Razzak, filed a First Information Report with police, claiming they had bought the hospital, founded by United Presbyterian Church, but that the hospital's administrators refused to hand it over. They later added a charge of blasphemy against the administrators. Four members of the staff were held by police. The Catholic Bishop of Islamabad-Rawalpindi, Rufin Anthony contacted various Christian activists and leaders about the event, leading to an investigation by the district coordination officer in Rawalpindi, Saqib Zafar. Mr Zafar said: "The initial investigation has revealed that the claims made by Malik Nur Muhammad are false."[394]

August 2011: Christian men Ishfaq Munawar and Naeem Masih were returning home after an early morning prayer service at a church in Sohrab Goth on Pakistan Independence Day (14th), when ethnic Pashtun youths stopped them and attacked them. Ishfaq Munawar's brother Liaqat Munawar said: "The Pashtun youths… tried to force them to recite the

*Kalma* [Islamic profession of faith] and become Muslims, telling them that this was the only way they could live peacefully in the city. They also offered monetary incentives and 'protection' to Ishfaq and Naeem, but the two refused to renounce Christianity." After this the youths went to a car parked nearby. Munawar and Masih got back onto their motorcycle, when suddenly the car returned, reversing into the Christians. "The Muslims got out of the car armed with iron rods and attacked Ishfaq and Naeem, shouting that they should either recite the *Kalma* or be prepared to die," said Liaqat Munawar. The two Christians were severely beaten and left unconscious. Ishfaq Munawar's jaw was fractured and five teeth were broken.[395]

August 2011: A group of Christians were attacked by extremists while watching a film about Jesus Christ in Abbottabad, northern Pakistan. As well as assaulting the Christians, the attackers smashed the projector.[396]

September 2011: Christian and Hindu Dalit families among the flood victims in Sindh Province were thrown out of refugee camps set up by the government and did not receive humanitarian aid.[397]

September 2011: 13-year-old Christian girl Faryal Tauseef, a student at Sir Syed High School, in the northern town of Havelian, was beaten, expelled and her family driven out of their home after she mispelt a word in a test. Writing in the Pakistan language of Urdu, Faryal put 'laanat' (meaning 'curse') instead of 'Naat' (meaning a poem in praise of Mohammed). After looking at the papers, Faryal's teacher, Fareeda Bibi, summoned the girl and scolded and beat her. Next day, male students held a rally demanding that a criminal case be registered against Faryal and that she be expelled. Local Muslim clerics also called on district authorities to take action against the girl and her family. The area's Managing Director, Asif Siddiki, summoned Faryal and her mother, who both immediately apologised and said the mistake was not intentional. But, district authorities expelled her from the school and transferred her mother, a nurse, from a hospital in Abbotabad to another elsewhere.[398]

September 2011: On Friday 9th, a Christian prisoner accused of blasphemy, Aslam Masih, died in jail of Dengue virus – a treatable disease – after officials refused treatment. Police had released Masih due to lack of evidence, but re-arrested him, reportedly after pressure from Islamic missionary group Tablighi Jammat.[399]

September 2011: A 32-year-old Christian woman was raped while returning home on Thursday 15th to Mustafabad, in Punjab Province's Kasur district, from the factory where she works. "As soon as I entered our

street, [my neighbour] Bhallu appeared from the shadows and put his hand on my mouth. A second person, who I later recognized as Bhallu's friend Shera, came from behind and put a pistol on my temple. A third person also appeared on the scene, and together they first gagged me and then forcibly took me to an abandoned house. I tried my best to get free from their hold and save myself, but they were too powerful for me. I tried screaming, but they hit me. Not for a minute did they acknowledge that I was a mother to five children. Then they raped me, one after the other. Their third accomplice stood guard as they tore in on me like animals." After she pressed charges, local Islamists reportedly threatened to harm her family unless the charges were dropped.[400]

November 2011: Bookstore owner Gulzar Masih and his family fled their homes in Sialkot district after a former business partner accused him of blasphemy. Mr Masih found burnt papers, which contained excerpts from the *Qur'an,* stuffed underneath the shutter of his bookstore when he was opening up one morning. Abdul Rauf, Mr Masih's former business associate, accused him of blasphemy. Mr Masih and his family fled after receiving threats. According to Fr Naeem Taj the burnt pages were planted, as Mr Rauf was jealous that Mr Masih's bookstore was more successful than his own.[401]

January 2012: Four men from a mosque – one armed with an axe – burst into the Philadelphia Pentecostal church in a slum area of central Karachi, where children were practising Christmas carols. The men beat the children and smashed the furniture. They threw the microphone to the floor, saying 'You are disturbing our prayers. We can't pray properly. How dare you use the mike and speakers?' After a boy outside the church called for help, the men ran, but one of them was caught by local residents and beaten before the police turned up. Church members were too frightened to go to church the next day. Residents did not register an FIR. The priest at another church in the area, Fr Arif M Shera, explained why the area's Christians acted as they did: "Though it was our house of worship which was attacked and our children who were beaten up, we apologised to the other party… For the sake of our lives we said that it was our fault."[402]

January 2012: Pakistan's Punjab government was accused of "brutal injustice" for sending bulldozers into a church-owned site and demolishing homes for the poor, the elderly and the homeless as well as a school and a church. Poverty-stricken families living on the two-acre site in Lahore were woken at 6.30am and were asked to evacuate their homes

immediately. All the buildings on the site were destroyed including the church and at least seven houses which still had the occupants' belongings inside.[403]

February 2012: Saira Khokhar, a senior teacher at the City Foundation School, Lahore, was taken into police custody after a mob burst into the school following accusations of desecrating the *Qur'an*. The Christian teacher was cleaning out her office cupboards with a Muslim school cleaner, who noticed a booklet containing Qur'anic verses in the bin and took it to the Muslim teachers, who then demanded an apology. The teacher said she knew nothing about it, and that the cleaner had said nothing about it to her. The following day a mob gathered accusing her of desecrating the *Qur'an*. Police release her without any charges within a week.[404]

March 2012: A 14-year-old Christian girl was repeatedly raped by a policeman at gun point, while her grandparents were bound and gagged in the next room. Police officer Nawaz Wahla broke into the house with an accomplice on the night of the 7th in Sheikhupura district in the Punjab.[405]

March-April 2012: Christian woman Shamin Bibi, a mother of five, was beaten and stripped of her clothes. Her attackers lambasted her family for dressing smartly and said they should only wear outfits befitting their status as manual workers from a religious minority. Landlords, brothers Sajid Ali and Abid Ashan, stand accused to the attack carried out in Gojra. Fr Yaqub Yousaf, the local parish priest, said: "Landlords have no pity. They walk around with guns and have no respect for Christians. Social injustice and divisions are used by cruel landlords to protect their vested interests and maintain people on the margins of society in conditions of inferiority."[406]

May 2012: Christians of the Bhondary Wala village in the Narang Mandi tried to save their graveyard, which was set up before partition, from being converted into agriculture land by retired Colonel Farrukh Alam. He claimed ownership of the land and told Christians to make alternative arrangements. The graveyard has already been shrunk to three kanals, from the original 10 – a kanal is an eighth of an acre – after the colonel dug a boundary around it.[407]

July 2012: Eight men dressed in police uniform abducted Christian pastor, Victor Samuel. Arriving at his office in Toba Tek Singh, Punjab Province, they asked him to come with them, claiming his ex-wife, April, had filed a complaint against him concerning some jewels he had not returned her. She denies filing any complaint. After questioning him they asked the

pastor and his brother, Sikander Samuel, to accompany them to the police station on a jeep. However, on the way, the kidnappers let the brother go and drove off with the clergyman. The pastor has not been seen since.[408]

July 2012: Fr Rehmat Hakim Michael, pastor of Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church, Islamabad, was accused of kidnapping and killing the wife and two daughters of Afghan man, Javed Iqbal, in 2001, even though Fr Michael was in Gujrat at the time, only arriving in Islamabad in 2007. It was alleged that after the women refused to convert to Christianity, they were kidnapped by Fr Michael and "his gang" and never seen again. An FIR was made against the priest, but upon investigating officers found that the accusations started after the church won a court case over a church-owned house, which another Afghan man had tried to gain ownership of, after being allowed to live there when he was jobless. When questioned, Mr Iqbal couldn't remember the name of his kidnapped wife, and had to "consult documents" before giving a name.[409]

August 2012: Rev Zafar Bhatti, president of the Jesus World Mission, was imprisoned following accusations that he sent a Muslim elder text messages insulting the Islamic Prophet Mohammed's mother. Ahmed Khan, deputy Secretary of the local Jamat Ehl-e-Sunnat, filed a complaint against the clergyman at New Town police station, Rawalpindi on 11th July, after receiving text messages on his mobile phone, insulting Mohammed's mother, from an unregistered number. He said that if an investigation for blasphemy was not opened under article 295 C of the Penal Code, his organisation would take matters in its own hands – even though insulting the Prophet's mother falls under article 295 A, which does not carry the death penalty. On Thursday 16th police arrested Rev Bhatti and his sister-in-law Nasreen Bibi, physically abusing and torturing him to extract a confession. Despite violence the minister insisted on his innocence.[410]

August 2012: Ten-year-old Christian girl, Allah Rakhi, was raped by 60-year-old Muslim merchant, Muhammad Nazir, in Faisalabad. On Saturday 25th the girl, from a poor family in Yousafabad, Madina Town, Faisalabad, went to Mr Nazir's shop, with her 8-year-old sister Suneha, to sell some old items. Mr Nazir said he he had no money to buy the items with and asked them to come to his home for the cash. He only took 10-year-old Allah into his house. When Suneha entered some time later, she found her sister lying naked and in pain, and ran to fetch their father, Sarfraz Masih. He found his daughter on the floor, unconscious and bleeding. A medical examination confirmed the girl had been raped.[411]

August-September 2012: Rimsha Masih, a young girl from a suburb on the outskirts of the capital, Islamabad, was accused of burning 10 pages of the Noorani Qaida, an Islamic booklet used to learn basic Arabic and the *Qur'an*, on the 17th August. It is also alleged that she put the booklet into a plastic bag and threw it into a bin. A police case was registered against Rimsha and she was placed in custody. Peter Jacob, executive secretary of the Catholic Church in Pakistan's National Commission for Justice and Peace, told Aid to the Church in Need that he strongly doubted the allegation, adding: "I would say the case against Rimsha is concocted – engineered." It later emerged that Rimsha was barely 14 years old and that her mental age was lower than her physical age. 300 or more families fled from G-12 sector Islamabad, where Rimsha lives, fearing retribution from extremists. Bishop Sebastian Shaw said that the allegations have caused deep anxiety among Christians and other minority groups. [412]

October 2012: A Pentecostal Church in Essa Nagri, a Christian slum area in Karachi, was attacked by men said to be connected with the Taliban. Church windows were smashed, the donations box was looted – the equivalent of *c.*£269 was stolen – and Bibles and hymn books were taken outside, torn and trampled and danced upon. The attack happened during a power black-out on the 18th. Problems for the Christians in Essa Nagri are common; this attack came 10 days after an attack by a Muslim mob on the nearby St Francis Catholic Church during a protest about similar blackouts. Groups said to have Taliban connections routinely attack churches and Ahmadi Muslim places of worship in Karachi. They have been entering Essa Nagri with heavy machine guns and shooting Christians, stealing from shops, and demanding money from shopkeepers, kidnapping Christian girls and boys to use in the sex trade. A local tribal council has enforced *sharia* fines on the Christian community and the Jizya tax is collected from non-Muslims – two Christians were killed during an attempt to collect the tax in September 2012. Local Christians built a wall all around their area for protection, but police equipped with tear-gas tore it down on the 17th, the day before the Pentecostal Church was raided, ostensibly because the wall blocked the access to a mosque.[413]

November 2012: All charges against Rimsha Masih were dismissed by chief justice Iqbal Hameed-ur Rehman on Tuesday 20th at the High Court on the grounds that there were no witnesses to the alleged crime. Muslim Imam, Khalid Jadoon, now faces a charge of making a false accusation, after witnesses claimed that he planted the evidence on Miss Masih.[414]

December 2012: A 22-year-old Christian man, Nadeem Masih, died in prison on Saturday 1st in suspicious circumstances. On 22nd November, he

was imprisoned following an accusation of burning pages of the *Qur'an*. Police made no investigation and in a subsequent statement police said Mr Masih was placed in custody to guarantee him "greater safety" against possible reprisals. Christian lawyers claimed he was beaten to death in his cell, and demanded an autopsy. Fr Arif John of Lahore Diocese said, "The authorities should investigate the circumstances under which he passed away. The allegation of blasphemy should not be used to kill the people."[415]

January 2013: Barkat Masih, who was sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2011, had the sentenced overturned on appeal. Mr Masih, 56, a Hindu convert to Christianity, prevented workers from entering an office where property deeds were kept, in his capacity as a security guard. Two of them – Muhammad Saleem and Muhammad Shoaib – filed a report with police that he had insulted the Prophet Mohammed. However, Judge Javed Ahmed of Bahawalpur High Court acquitted him on Monday 28th.[416]

February 2013: Christian man, Younas Masih, 55, died after being shot five times as he returned home from work – his co-workers had been pressuring him to convert to Islam. The killing followed a heated discussion with his co-workers after he again refused to change his religion. Police refused to open an investigation into the murder despite requests from his family.[417]

March 2013: 178 Christian homes and two churches were torched when a 3,000-strong mob attacked Joseph Colony, near Badami Bah, Lahore, following an accusation that 26-year-old Christian sanitary worker Sawan Masih had defamed the Prophet Mohammed. The accusation followed an altercation with Muslim barber, Imran Shahid, who refused to serve him. Police arrested the Christian after Shahid recorded a charge of blasphemy against Masih, stating the young man had insulted the Prophet Mohammed whilst drunk. The following morning a mob attacked the Christian colony. Resident Salamat Masih told AsiaNews, "We were working like every day, when we started to hear a noise, and suddenly a wall of people fell upon the colony. They threw acid and stoned our houses, then set them on fire. The authorities intervened only when everything was destroyed". Residents fled attackers and at least 35 people were injured. Nobody was killed. Bishop Sebastian Shaw of Lahore blamed the provincial Government of the Punjab for failing to act. He told Aid to the Church in Need that the attack on Saturday 9th was "well organised" and could have been averted by adequate police protection, as the Government "knew… about the threat of this attack happening."

Muslim human rights activist, Ameena Zaman, agreed with the bishop's assessment: "the police had ordered the Christians of Joseph Colony to evacuate their homes 12 hours before the accident. If the police knew that there would be an attack, why did they do nothing to save the Christians?" Islamic leaders condemned the violence. Muslim cleric Shia Allama Zubair described the anti-Christian attack as being "against Islam" adding "only peace and harmony can create a prosperous nation." Fr. Francis Nadeem paid tribute to the Muslim leaders, thanking them for their messages of solidarity, and adding, "I'm really happy that the Punjab government has immediately helped the victims." [418]

April 2013: Muslim leaders defended 19-year-old Christian man, Philip Masih, who was accused of blasphemy. Mr Masih, who sells electrical goods, was accused of blasphemy by his neighbour, Muhammad Jameel, for removing a poster of a Muslim conference from a wall in his store. Jameel insisted that he stop and gathered armed men together to punish him. Police intervention prevented a mass attack against the Christian minority. Muhammad Jameel tried to file a complaint against the young Christian man under the blasphemy laws, but due to the testimony of some local residents and the intervention of Islamic religious leaders, including Muhammad Rehan, who is a member of the local Committee for Interfaith Dialogue, and Mufti Muhammad Zia Madni, the charges were dropped. Philip Masih and Muhammad Jameel previously had a business disagreement. Mr Masih and his family are still in hiding.[419]

May 2013: The Pakistani Bishops' Justice and Peace Commission called upon Pakistan's new prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, to have false and offensive statements about Christianity and other minority religions removed from school textbooks. 55 chapters from 22 textbooks used in Sindh and Punjab contain defamatory statements. "This approach is visibly discriminatory against non-Muslim citizens of Pakistan," said Peter Jacob the commission's executive director. The commission also called for an end to the practice of requiring non-Muslim students to take Islamic Studies.[420]

May 2013: A police officer guarding an Assembly of God Church in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, was shot dead when two Islamic fundamentalists attacked the building. Before fleeing the scene, they took the dead officer's weapon and opened fire on the church. Two clergymen were inside at the time. Tensions were running high in the area after minority groups called for the resignation of the province's Chief Minister, Pervez Kharrak, for saying that Muslims could not be street cleaners or janitors "only minorities could do those jobs" – even though

there is a dearth of these posts. The two police officers were guarding the church after it received threats.[421]

June 2013: [422]Christian lawyer, Mushtaq Gill, was threatened with death if he continued to provide legal assistance to three Christian women who were stripped naked and paraded through the streets of Sereser village. Among those allegedly responsible was Rana Ishaq, a member of the country's ruling Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) party.

July 2013: Violence against religious minorities in Pakistan has increased over the past 18 months, according to a report by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. *Pakistan: A History of Violence* recorded 203 incidents, including more than 1,800 casualties and more than 700 deaths. While Shia Muslims bore the brunt of the violence, Christians suffered 37 attacks, 11 people were killed, 36 wounded and five raped.[423]

September 2013: Hundreds of Christians demonstrated outside the Lahore Press Club, demanding justice for a 16-year-old Christian girl who was allegedly abducted, gang-raped and made to convert to Islam before being forced into marriage in August. Her family were insulted and harassed when they reported the case to police, although an FIR was registered. A judge has since ordered police and suspects to appear in court on Monday 16th.[424]

September 2013: Two suicide bombers attacked All Saints Anglican Church, Peshawar just after the Communion service on Sunday 22nd had finished. Bishop Sebastian Shaw, Apostolic Administrator of Lahore Archdiocese, told ACN that 81 people died in the blast and were buried on the same day. More than 140 people were wounded by the explosion. Militant group, Tahrik-e-Taliban Jandullah, claimed to have carried out the bombing in retaliation for US drone strikes.[425]

# Saudi Arabia

| Population | Religions | Christian Pop. |
|---|---|---|
| 25 million | Muslim 95%<br>Christian 4%<br>Other 1% | 1 million |

Saudi Arabia continues to have one of the world's worst records regarding religious freedom, an assessment confirmed by many leading human rights observers. Given apparent liberalising tendencies of recent years, the state's approach to non-Muslims has shown little or no sign of major improvement, a problem acknowledged to have huge implications, given Saudi Arabia's far-reaching impact, not least across the Middle East. In spite of declarations of new restraints imposed on the much-feared religious police, a US report on religious freedom stated that in Saudi Arabia "the public practice of any religion other than Islam is prohibited".[426] Similar concerns were expressed by the UK's All-Party Parliamentary Working Group on International Religious Freedom, which highlighted religious freedom abuses in the secretive Arabic kingdom.

A review of cases of religious freedom violations in Saudi Arabia shows that Christians and other religious minorities continue to be systematically persecuted. Public display of crosses and other symbols is strictly forbidden, as is public worship by Christians and adherents of other non-Islamic religions. Despite an apparent increase in official Saudi statements permitting non-Islamic worship in private, religious police have reportedly continued to raid people's homes. Bishops, priests and other Christian leaders often have to travel in secret. Non-Muslims are not allowed to be buried in the country. Saudi Arabia is now the only country in the Middle East without a recognised church since one opened in Qatar in 2008. Official school textbooks were criticised for inciting hatred towards Christians and other non-Muslim faiths, and although the State did remove some offending references, others were said to remain.

With Islam in Saudi Arabia being very strongly influenced by the fundamentalist Wahhabi movement, problems for the Church are exacerbated by Muslim hardliners' concerns about the country being home to as many as one million Christians. Many Christians are domestics and other menial workers from countries such as Philippines and several other predominantly Catholic nations. Fears persist about evangelisation in a country where conversion from Islam to another faith is punishable by death. The country's religious police, which enforce strict observance of

Islamic practices, follow a zero-tolerance policy towards any form of Christian proselytism. Hence, there are repeated reports of Christians receiving harsh penalties including incarceration, whipping and other abuse for activities described as evangelisation and blasphemy.

In light of such endemic abuses, human rights organisations strongly criticised UK Prime Minister David Cameron for brokering arms deals with Saudi Arabia. In November 2012 he paid a stop-off visit to Saudi during a tour of Gulf States to promote the sale of 100 Typhoon jets, worth £6 billion.[427]

Saudi Arabia has also exported Wahhabism, causing tensions in other countries. According to one report, at least $87 (£55) billion was spent during the nineties and noughties propagating Wahhabism abroad. Former US Ambassasdor, Curtin Windsor said, "[I]t is the overwhelming wealth of Saudi Arabia that enables the Wahhabi sect to proselytise on a global scale, not the intrinsic appeal of its teachings." The bulk of this funding goes to the construction and running of overseas mosques, madrassas, and other institutions promoting Wahhabism.[428] Some commentators have linked the spread of Wahhabism to the persecution of Christians and other minorities – including Muslim groups. For example, the growth of Saudi Arabia funded Wahhabism in Bosnia Herzegovina has been seen as the root cause of increasing problems for Christains in some regions of the country.[429]

July 2011: Two Indians, Vasantha Sekhar Vara, 28, and Nese Yohan, 31, were suddenly released and sent back to their country after being jailed while organising a Bible-study group in a private apartment in Riyadh. They received 45 days of pre-trial detention and were put on charges of proselytism. After brief detention at a police station, they were moved to a massively overcrowded jail in Riyadh, where they were held for several months without trial. The two Indians were part of a 70-strong Christian group worshipping in private homes. Bibles, guitars and other musical instruments and books were confiscated. One elder said that in the apartment where the group met the religious police "broke furniture… and painted what I believe were *Qu'ran* verses on the walls".[430]

January 2012: A group of 35 Christians from Ethiopia were arrested and beaten after they were caught at a prayer meeting in Jeddah. The incident, reported by Human Rights Watch, stated that the 29 women and six men were arrested in mid-December 2011 while praying during Advent. They

were taken to a police station and then on to a prison. The women were forced to strip and undergo 'body cavity' searches while the men were insulted, called 'unbelievers' and beaten. They were later charged with "unlawful mingling" of unmarried people from the opposite sex, which is banned. [431]

March 2012: Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdul Aziz ibn Abdullah, the highest religious authority in Saudi Arabia, declared that all churches in the Arabian Peninsula should be destroyed. He made the ruling after a proposal by a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of Kuwait called for a ban on the construction of new churches in the country. The proposal was rejected by the parliament, but a Kuwaiti NGO, the Society of the Revival of Islamic Heritage, called on the Grand Mufti for a clarification on the position of Islamic law on a prohibition of new churches. The Grand Mufti, who is also head of the Saudi Supreme Council of Islamic Scholars, quoted the prophet Mohammed, saying that Islam is the only religion that should exist on the Arabian Peninsula. He said that as part of the Arabian Peninsula, Kuwait should destroy all its churches. [432]

June 2012: Abdul Latif Abudl Aziz al-Sheikh, the new reformist head of the Mutawa, the religious police, announced a reduction in the organisation's powers. It follows a massive decline in the Mutuwa's popularity, with a sharp increase in complaints against them. The criticism grew after a fatal accident allegedly caused by Mutawa police, who chased a man who refused to reduce the volume of his car radio. The Mutuwa are responsible for ensuring strict adherence to *Shari'a* law. They impose harsh punishments on people caught practising non-Islamic faith not in accordance with strict Sunni regulations.[433]

May 2013: The problem of acute persecution of Christians and other religious minorities in Saudi Arabia failed to improve over the last 12-18 months, according to the US State Department's 2012 International Religious Freedom Report. The report, which stated that the government "executed at least one individual sentenced on charges of 'witchcraft and sorcery'", accused the regime of "significant political, economic, legal, social and religious discrimination". Although the government had removed some religious intolerance from certain school textbooks, it was said to have retained "objectionable content", including justification for the social exclusion and killing of Christians and other religious minorities including followers of non-mainstream Islam.[434]

May 2013: A court in Al Khobar city, Saudi Arabia, jailed two men and had them whipped after they were found guilty of encouraging a Muslim woman to convert to Christianity and helping her flee the country. The woman, unnamed for security reasons, worked in an insurance company alongside the two men, one a Lebanese and the other from Saudi. It is alleged the woman fell in love with the Lebanese, who gave her books and invited her to follow a social network religious chat room. When she reportedly converted and fled to Lebanon, her father claimed she left the country illegally, citing Saudi law which states that a woman requires the permission of a 'guardian' (father, brother or husband) for a passport. The case became famous in July 2012 when she defended her new faith in a YouTube video made in Lebanon. The woman gained religious asylum in Sweden. Meantime, her alleged Lebanese lover who was considered the ring-leader, received 300 lashes and six years in prison. His accomplice had 200 lashes and was jailed for two years.[435]

June 2013: AsiaNews reported that a Saudi writer, with 100,000 Twitter followers, declared a wish to 'harass' (Asia News' word) working women. Opposition to women in the workplace represents a serious threat to Christians in Saudi, since many of them come to the country specifically for employment. Their low social status as maids and other domestics means they may be more susceptible to pressure to conform.[436]

# Sudan and South Sudan

| Population | Religions | Christian Pop. |
|---|---|---|
| 45 million | Muslim 70%, Christian 15%<br>Local religions 12%<br>Other 3% | 6.75 million |

More than two years on from the formal division of the country to form Sudan and South Sudan, progress has been slow regarding the people's desperate struggle for basic rights and resources. The widespread optimism that greeted the 9th July 2011 secession of the South to form Africa's newest nation has in many cases quickly and comprehensively turned to disappointment and even despair. A mass movement of millions of people to find a new future in the new country led to a humanitarian crisis as a fragile infrastructure still reeling from the civil war (1983-2005) proved itself incapable of meeting many people's basic needs including jobs, schools and roads. The pressure to move from the north was prompted by a shake-up in citizenship rights and residency permits, putting pressure on people of Southern Sudanese extraction to return to their ancestral homelands. But, unable to find work, homes, healthcare, education and other essentials, many went back north. Christian-run schools which feared closure continued to run, catering for youngsters whose families had abandoned the South.

But the country to which they returned was by now asserting a radical agenda, one deeply intolerant in its attitudes towards minority groups. Just months after the South's secession, Sudan's Islamist President Omar al-Bashir declared his intention to create a fully-fledged Islamic state. Bashar stated that the new constitution then under review was intended to reflect the new position that "the official religion will be Islam and Islamic law the main source".[437] Bashir, wanted by the International Criminal Court since 2009, clearly had no intention of making life easy for Christians and other non-Muslims. Even before the introduction of the new constitution, evidence showed the regime was enforcing the existing one much more vigorously. In line with Islamic *Shari'a* law under Article 126 of the 1991 Criminal Act, apostasy from Islam is punishable by death. Such a sentence has not been carried out for 20 years, but even so there have been a number of apostasy cases in the last two years. By the summer of 2013, reports from the Fides news agency described how, between 2011 and 2012, 170 people were imprisoned or indicted for apostasy. In some

instances converts to Christianity were being "hunted down".[438] Similarly human rights groups noted how government officials had ordered doctors to perform a number of amputations involving people found guilty of robbery.[439]

Increasing Islamism is being linked to a media campaign warning of the rise of "Christianisation", an unlikely phenomenon given the extent of Christian emigration to the South. By mid 2012, reports were coming in of churches being attacked and clergy being arrested. Sources close to Aid to the Church in Need warned that for clergy in particular the situation was worse even than before 2005, during the civil war. One leading charity for persecuted Christians noted "an increase in arrests, detentions and deportations of Christians and of those suspected having links to them" particularly in the capital.[440] For some groups, the loss of rights and status was so great that they feared speaking out at all, sensing the government was looking for an excuse to carry out direct and heavy-handed retaliation. In many cases attacks against Christians and others are inextricably linked to a growing intolerance of minority tribal communities. There has been widespread targeting of African ethnic groups, apparently showing the government's determination to pursue an agenda dominated by Islamisation and Arabisation.

Of particular concern was the government's violence towards the Nuba people. Human rights observers highlighted the intensive bombing campaign of the Nuba mountains, mainly populated by Christians, saying that it "reportedly amounted to ethnic cleansing".[441] As the political divide between north and south became wider, with worsening clashes over disputed territory, the outlook for most communities in Sudan, perhaps especially Christian ones, seemed particularly bleak.

February 2011: Ikhlas Anglo, a Christian widow from Khartoum, was fired from her job after taking leave to search for her kidnapped daughter, despite having cleared it with her supervisor. Her 15-year-old daughter, Hiba Abdelfadil Anglo, went missing while returning from the Ministry of Education in Khartoum, where in June 2010 she had gone to obtain transcripts for entry to secondary school. Two days later, the family started receiving abusive telephone calls and SMS messages ordering them to pay 1,500 Sudanese pounds (£350) for her release. Mrs Anglo said the kidnappers were Muslim extremists who targeted the family because they were Christian. When she attempted to report the crime, police refused to register her report, and she claimed officer Fakhr El-Dean Mustafa, of the

Family and Child Protection Unit, told her: "You must convert to Islam if you want your daughter back."[442]

June 2011: Christians were killed by military intelligence agents and Islamic militants after attacks on churches in South Kordofan state. Nimeri Philip Kalo, a student at St. Paul Major Seminary, was seized by a Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) intelligence unit and detained near the UN Mission in Kadugli's al Shaeer area. He was shot in front of witnesses. Mr Kalo was fleeing the town with other Christians after Muslim militias, said to be working with the SAF, attacked and looted at least three church buildings in Kadugli. Witnesses said SAF soldiers told Mr Kalo that, as a Christian, he was opposed to the Islamic government. After this they killed him. The same day, Islamic militants loyal to the SAF killed 33-year-old Adeeb Gismalla Aksam in Kadugli. The militants had previously fired shots at a Catholic Church where an afternoon Mass was taking place. SAF agents then arrested parish priest Fr Abraham James Lual and held him in custody for two days. They tortured him and accused him of preaching opposition to the Islamic government. Reports stated that Islamic militants loyal to the SAF looted other church buildings in Kadugli.[443]

June 2011: The governor of North Kordofan, Mutasim Mirghani Zaki El-deen, declared jihad against the predominantly Christian Nuba people.[444]

July 2011: Thousands of people in South Kordofan came under fire in attacks which also appeared to target churches. More than 70,000 people fled their homes to escape bombs dropped by fighter jets. A United Nations report showed how churches had been targeted and other sources indicated that Christian bookshops had been torched as part of a military campaign led by the Khartoum government. Neville Kyrke-Smith, UK Director of Aid to the Church in Need, called for an end to violence. He said: "Any attacks at this sensitive time will undermine the fragile peace... and these specific attacks on churches will be felt by Christian communities across both Sudan and the new South Sudan."[445]

July 2011: At around 7pm on the 18th July a group of Islamist militants attacked the Omdurman home of Anglican Bishop Andudu Adam Elnail when he was being visited by two other clergy, Rev Luka Bulus and Rev Thomas Youhana. All three were outside the house at the time of the attack and were unharmed. The militants left a letter at the scene threatening similar attacks. Rev Bulus is a noted supporter of the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement, making him a target for Islamic extremists.[446]

July-August 2011: Muslim extremists sent text messages to at least 10 church leaders in Khartoum warning that they would target Christian leaders and buildings. One message read: "We want this country to be purely an Islamic state, so we must kill the infidels and destroy their churches all over Sudan."[447]

September 2011: Following a five-hour interrogation, Fr Abraham Lual of Kadugli parish, South Kordofan, went into hiding. He had been detained three times in the past three months. On two of those occasions he had been tortured. On 28th August 2011 he received injuries to his left leg as a result of torture carried out while he was detained in Kadugli, the capital of South Kordofan.[448]

December 2011: Christian teenager Hilba Abdelfadil Anglo said she had forgiven the gang of extremists who had kidnapped her and carried out physical and sexual attacks against her. In June 2010 the then 15-year-old was abducted before being beaten unconscious. Constantly moving her to different places around Khartoum, the gang threatened to kill her if she tried to escape and called her family 'infidels' for their Christian faith. She was raped by the gang leader. After a year in captivity, she had convinced her captors to think she had converted to Islam, which meant they relaxed controls on her. She escaped and found her way back to her family. When she went to the police to report the gang, they refused to act unless she converted to Islam. In her latest report, Hilba stated that she was praying for her attackers. She added that God "forgives them for what they did to me". She added: "I also thank God for all those around the world who pray for people like me and my family. It was because of your prayers that my situation changed."[449]

January 2012: Two church leaders were seized – and one of them beaten – after Sudan's Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments threatened pastors caught bearing public witness to their faith. Sources said Church leader James Kat of the Church of Sudan was beaten while in police custody for a day. The previous week another church leader, Gabro Haile Selassie, was arrested after a property dispute with the government. Selassie refused to be evicted from his home in Khartoum, which authorities gave to a Muslim businessman. Selassie had refused to be evicted until he had received an official document authorising the government's action.[450]

February 2012: A new Christian school used for catechesis and Bible study was bombed in South Kordofan. Nobody was hurt. Heiban Bible

College came under fire on the first day it opened for classes. Eye-witnesses reported that it took four fly-over passes before the building with its cross on the top was hit. Charity Samaritan's Purse, which supported the college, said the Sudanese Air Force carried out the attack, adding that in the previous six months four churches built by the organisation had been destroyed by bombing action.[451]

April 2012: A clergy training centre in 60th Street, central Khartoum was set on fire in an attack blamed on supporters of Islamist leader Muhammad Abdel-Kareem. During the violence targeting the Evangelical Church, Bibles were burned and a students' accommodation block was gutted. Initially, when the Islamists descended on the church in the city's Sawafi area, government security denied them access but some extremists "sneaked" through the barrier.[452]

April 2012: A Muslim mob set fire to a Catholic church frequented by Southern Sudanese. The church, in Al-Jiraif district, was on disputed land and the attack on Saturday night was linked to a fall-out connected to hostilities between Sudan and South Sudan over control of an oil town on their ill-defined border.[453]

June 2012: Government officials in Khartoum gave the go-ahead for the demolition of two church buildings in the area, the first St John's Episcopal Church in Haj Yousif and the second, a Catholic church building. A local source said: "The government wants to remove all churches from Khartoum. Tell churches, all churches, to stand in prayer for the Church in Sudan.[454]

November 2012: Sudan armed forces attacked at least 26 villages in the Nuba Mountains, home to the country's largest Christian population. Satellite images showed burned-out huts amid reports that schools, homes, churches, food crops and grasslands were destroyed in a 54 square mile area.[455]

December 2012: Coptic Orthodox priests Rev Markus Anthony and Rev Sarbion Hussein and three other Christians were arrested for converting a young Muslim woman to Christianity. The convert fled the country fearing for her life. The Sudanese priests and others were later released.[456]

February 2013: 55 Christians linked to the Evangelical Church in Khartoum were detained without charge. The cultural centre of the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Centre in Khartoum was raided by the National Intelligence and Security Services. Three people were arrested at the

premises, all from South Sudan, and several items were confiscated, including books and media equipment.[457]

March 2013: In the latest attacks on mainly Christian communities in the Nuba Mountains, a church building was destroyed by bombs apparently dropped by the government's Russian-made Antanov airplanes. The bombing came two months after two Christians were killed and six others were injured in attacks. Local Christian sources state that the Khartoum regime's armed struggle against rebels has the secondary aim of ridding the region of non-Arabs and Christians.[458]

April 2013: Fr Maurino, a Catholic priest from South Sudan, and two expatriate missionaries, working in Khartoum, were deported. According to Fr Maurino, no reason was given.[459]

April 2013: Al-Fatih Taj El-sir, Sudan's Minister of Guidance and Endowments, responsible for overseeing religious affairs, announced that no new licences for building churches would be issued. He stated that declining numbers of Christians, emigrating to the South, and an increase in abandoned churches meant no new churches were necessary.[460]

July 2013: Reports detailed how converting from Islam to Christianity in Sudan has become more dangerous since the secession of South Sudan. About 170 people were imprisoned or indicted for apostasy between 2011 and 2012. A Christian who fled from the Nuba Mountains described how he was arrested in Khartoum on 23rd February and endured extensive questioning by officials of the National Intelligence Security Service. His computer, iPad, mobile phone, passport and other documents were seized. A group called Barnabas Team reported how since July 2011, "the persecution of Christians in Sudan has increased sharply… churches are demolished, Christian institutions and schools closed, Christians arrested, foreign Christian workers expelled and Christian publications seized."[461]

# Sri Lanka

| Population | Religions | Christian Pop |
|---|---|---|
| 20.2 million | Buddhist 70%<br>Hindu 12.5%, Islam 10%<br>Christian 7.5% | 1.5 million[462] |

Sri Lanka still carries deep scars four years after the end of the civil war that ran from 1983 to 2009. The conflict between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Tamil Tigers) was over the latter's demands for the creation of an independent Tamil state in the northern and eastern provinces of the island, where they are the ethnic majority. The war quickly assumed the character of an ethnic conflict, with the (mainly Buddhist) Sinhalese of the south pitted against the (mainly Hindu and Christian) Tamils in the north. Following the military victory over the north, there has been a resurgence of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, which sees Sri Lankan identity entwined with Sinhalese ethnicity and Theravada Buddhist culture. This has led to a rise in violent attacks on Christians since the end of the war: these appear to have been increasing since mid 2012.

This period saw the founding of Bodu Bala Sena ("Buddhist Power Force") which was linked to attacks on Christian churches – including a spate of attacks on 10 Protestant churches in early March 2013. However the organisation has denied all involvement.[463] It was founded by two Buddhist monks, both former members of Jathika Hela Urumaya ("National Front of Liberation"), who said the party was not militant enough to protect Buddhism.[464] Bodu Bala Sena's secretary, the venerable Galaboda Aththe Gnanasara Thera, called for the country to prepare to rally against Christian and Muslim "extremists" in March 2013.[465] Muslims have also experienced a rise in attacks and calls for restrictions to their religious practice over the last eighteen months.

Christians – particularly Evangelical Protestants – are accused of converting Buddhists by unethical means, leading to violence and discrimination at a local level. There were calls in late 2011 to introduce a new anti-conversion bill by the Jathika Hela Urumaya party – who proposed that a citizen would not be allowed to change to his/her religion, except in specific cases and with the permission of a magistrate.[466]

Attacks on churches and Christian clergy seem to be growing. From January to May 2013 at least 45 incidents of persecution against Christians

were recorded, whereas only 52 incidents against churches were recorded throughout the whole of 2012.[467]

July 2011: A pastor was brutally attacked and beaten in Ampara District on the eastern coast. The incident, on Sunday 10th, took place during a meeting on land distribution which he had been invited to by a Buddhist monk. The monk kicked the pastor repeatedly in his stomach and arms during the meeting, causing serious injuries. As the pastor fled to his home, his attackers followed him and shouted abuse at him and family members.[468]

July 2011: A mob of around 50 people attacked five Christian families in their homes in the Badulla District in south-eastern Sri Lanka. On the evening of Tuesday 19th the families were terrified after the group, who were armed with clubs, threw rocks at their roofs and windows. The families fled to the jungle. A grocery store owned by Christians was destroyed, the owner being seriously injured in the attack.[469]

November–December 2011: Sister Eliza, from the Missionaries of Charity (founded by Mother Teresa of Calcutta), was accused of "selling children" living in the Prem Nivesa hostel for teenage mothers in Moratuwa, on the outskirts of Colombo. On 23rd November police and officials from the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) surrounded the building to conduct an investigation, after which the property was seized and all adoptions halted. On the night of 25th November a group of police officers took Sister Eliza and two other Sisters to the house of a judge at Ja-ela, following which. Sister Eliza was then taken to the prison at Welikada, while the other Sisters were returned to their convent. After four days in prison, Sister Eliza was released by the magistrate, Yvonne Fernando. The Sister was fined Rs7,500 (about US$60 or £40) for each charge of illegal adoption and child trafficking, as well as a security bond of Rs50,000 (about US$380 or £250). Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, Archbishop of Colombo and president of the Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka, insisted that the government and national media withdraw the "unfounded and unjust accusations as soon as possible" and officially apologise to the missionaries. On 15th December the magistrate Yvonne Fernando acquitted Sister Mary Eliza of alla charges, starting that the NCPA had been behind the accusations. The original arrest warrant followed pressure from Anoma Dissayanake, president of the NCPA, an independent organisation that answers directly to the office of President Mahinda

Rajapaksa. Yvonne Fernando "advised" the NCPA to pay greater attention in future investigations and ordered the return of all documents taken during the police search.

June 2012: 13-year-old Catholic student Amila Tharanga was thrashed by his teacher for failing to name the Buddha's parents. No arrest warrant was issued for the physical beating which occurred at the Mahanama College Getambe in Kandy (Central Province) on Monday 11th. The Buddhist monk taking the Buddhism course asked Amila questions he could not answer. When the child said he was Catholic, the monk replied, "Even if you are Catholic, you should know Buddhism" and beat him about the head, causing his left ear to bleed. No one in the school tried to treat the wound. The monk and another teacher warned Amila not to report the incident.[470]

June 2012: The Ministry of Religious Affairs sent out a circular letter setting out regulations for buildings intended for public worship. The document stipulated that buildings – both already functioning and others planned for the future – could only be used for public religious purposes with the explicit permission of the ministry.[471]

August 2012: A church leader and his wife were attacked by a mob after visiting a member of their congregation. Reports state that the assault involved Buddhist monks and a man believed to have family connections to Sri Lanka's President.[472]

August 2012: A church leader and his wife were attacked after paying a visit to a family who had recently converted to Christianity. The Pastor in the Assemblies of God and his wife were returning home on a motorbike when a 4x4 vehicle pulled out, blocking the road. During the incident, on 9th August, the pastor's wife was pushed off the motorbike onto the ground. A mob of around 40 men surrounded them, shouting "kill them!" The men beat the pastor and threatened to kill him if he continued to preach Christianity. They also shouted abuse at his wife. Dragging the couple to the house they had visited earlier, the mob demanded to know how much the woman and her daughter living there had been paid to convert to Christianity. The women stated that that their conversion was a personal matter and that no money was involved. The church leader was beaten again before he escaped with his wife. Some eyewitnesses claimed that among the attackers was local businessman Thusitha Ranawaka, who is President Mahinda Rajapaksa's brother-in-law.[473]

August 2012: Buddhist monks occupied a Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Deniyaya, southern Sri Lanka, changing it into a Buddhist temple.[474]

September 2012: Catholic Bishop Rayyappu Joseph of Mannar was injured during an attack on a Catholic church in Karusal, in his diocese. The bishop had earlier called for an international investigation into abuses against the Tamil rebels committed by the government during the civil war.[475]

December 2012: Buddhist monks led a crowd of 1,000 people in an attack on a Protestant church in Weeraketiya, Hambantota District. During the incident on 9th December, the Church leader, Pastor Pradeeep, was wounded. Church furnishings and nearby parked cars were attacked. A group of Buddhists, including monks, had previously warned Pradeep not carry out Christian worship in Weeraketiya without their permission.[476]

March 2013: Christian charity Barnabas Fund reported 10 attacks in Sri Lanka in March 2013. The organisation stated the number of attacks was "a clear sign of a concerted plan on the part of radical Buddhist groups". Among the attacks was the destruction of the home of Pastor Pradeep Kumara in Katuwana on Monday 18th. At the time of the attack, only his wife and children were home. Having been threatened by the mob, the woman called her husband and the police, but the officers were not able to stop the destruction of the house. Pastor Kumara's car was destroyed in December 2012 and he received death threats.[477]

March 2013: Officers of the Kandy Headquarters Police Station kept three six-year-old children from the St Joseph's Boys Home in jail overnight. They were held after police questioned them about marks on their hands caused during a fight between them the previous day. Upon finding the children incarcerated, Brother Anton Joe, who runs the Home, asked why they had been imprisoned without either a woman police officer or a matron present as is prescribed for under-18s according to official police regulations. Following his questions, officers arrested him. They took him with the three children to the home of Acting Magistrate Upali Bopitiya who refused to grant bail, telling Brother Joe to make an application the following week. He remained in jail for 11 days and was finally released on bail on 27th March 2013. The case is currently at the Kandy Magistrates' Court. Brother Joe told the Asian Human Rights Commission that growing anti-Christian sentiment in Sri Lankan society was a significant factor in his mistreatment.[478]

April 2013: Thousands of young Catholics, Buddhists and Muslims joined together in Colombo to protest against recent acts of violence by radical Buddhist groups. One of the organisers, Catholic woman Marisa De Silva,

said: "We're still recovering from a long civil war, yet we see signs of hatred grow in our society. As the youth of this country, we feel that it is our responsibility to help build a Sri Lanka free from hatred."[479]

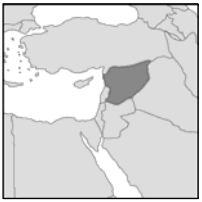
May 2013: Buddhist monks forced the closure of 18 churches in southern Sri Lanka, threatening pastors with death if they continued their activities. On 10th May the district secretary of Hambanthota called a meeting of local officials, senior police officers and Buddhist and Christian leaders to discuss rising tensions. During the meeting, Buddhist monks questioned the legality of the churches. At a follow-up meeting a week later, the monks said they had closed down a number of churches – later confirmed as 18 by local pastors – demanding that those still open be closed. Local pastors said monks had threatened them, saying: "If you don't stop your activities your destiny will be like Lional Jayasinghe", a religious minister who was killed in Hambanthota in the 1990s.[480]

June 2013: A group of unknown assailants attacked St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, Angulana, destroying the nineteenth-century statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Though shocked by the incident, worshippers were strengthened by what they considered to be a miracle – although the tabernacle was soaked in kerosene and set alight, the consecrated hosts inside were not damaged.[481]

June 2013: A Kings Revival Church pastor in the village of Ingiriya was interrogated by two policemen about the activities of his church, which has 60-70 members. Officers noted that posters had been put up all over the village stating: "We don't need a church in the village; all we need is a Buddhist temple. Chase the Christian pastor from the village!"[482]

June 2013: The Methodist Church in Batticaloa District was attacked during Sunday service by a mob armed with clubs, knives, and swords. Attackers demanded that the church to be closed down permanently. They beat up the worshippers and the pastor. Some of the injured victims had to be taken to the Valachchenai hospital. This was one of three attacks recorded in eastern Sri Lanka in early June.[483]

# Syria



| Population | Religions | Christian Population |
|---|---|---|
| 22 million | Muslim 92.75%<br>Christian 5.25%<br>Other 2% | 1.16 million[484] |

The chemical weapons attack on Ghouta, just outside Damascus, on 21st August 2013 – in which at least 3,600 were hospitalised and at least 355 died[485] – stepped up international concern over the situation in the country. But Syria's Christian leaders opposed plans by the west to increase the militarization of the region in response to the chemical attacks, claiming it would lead to more deaths and more misery for the country's civilains. Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregorios III of Antioch told ACN that "It is time to finish with these weapons and, instead of calling for violence, international powers need to work for peace."[486] Besides the Church, many other groups have spoken out against supplying weapons, but this did not stop the US providing armaments to opposition military groups from late August 2013.[487]

By the middle of 2013, violence had claimed more than 100,000 lives since the conflict began in spring 2011. With entire towns and villages empty and in ruins, at least four million people were displaced within the country. Nearly two million others had fled across Syria's borders. At the time of writing (August 2013), it was predicted that by 2014 10 million people, nearly half the country's pre-war population, would be in urgent need of aid, making it the worst disaster in the UN's history.[488]

Religious persecution has played a crucial part in the conflict in Syria, which the UN's High Commissioner for Refugees called "the worst humanitarian crisis since the end of the Cold War". Christians suffered considerably, as did so many faith communities. Islamist violence was mostly directed against other Muslims, but Christians were very much at risk too. Seen as sympathetic to President Assad's regime, Christians were victim to attacks from the rebel Free Syrian Army; on the other hand, seen as sympathetic to the West by virtue of their shared Christian faith, they were a target for forces loyal to the regime and fearful of international pressure mounting against the Syrian government. Such problems were compounded by the fact that Christians were most populous in regions where the violence was often most severe.[489]

Early on in the conflict, events in Homs – home to Syria's second largest Christian community – showed the extent of the crisis being faced by the faithful. Thousands upon thousands of Christians fled the city. In Homs' Christian quarter, eight or more ancient churches and other religious buildings were desecrated and ruined. Extremist soldiers also targeted mainstream Muslims. The faithful fled Homs for the nearby Valley of the Christians, home to numerous Christian-majority towns and villages. Emergency aid was urgently requested by leading Catholic charities amid reports that other organisations were ignoring the particularly severe crisis endured by Christians.

Although persecution of Christians was not as prevelant as some reports suggested, for some it was a very real phenomenon. ACN interviewed the Enser family who fled to Jordan from Damascus, where in early 2011 they encountered Islamists stating: "Don't celebrate Easter otherwise you will be killed like your Christ."[490] Claims of an anti-Christian dimension to the conflict became irrefutable when it became clear that clergy were at particular risk. Some were targeted after seeking to negotiate with terrorists for the release of kidnapped Christians. The October 2012 abduction and brutal killing of Fr Fadi Haddad, from Qatana, caused widespread shock. The outrage intensified barely six months later when two Archbishops from Aleppo were abducted – Boulos Yazigi and Yohanna Ibrahim. Months on from their kidnapping, some began to suspect that they were dead.

The killing and abduction of clergy, the desecration of churches, and ongoing violence and intimidation, left Christians with no option but to leave. As recently as the 1920s, Christians made up 30 percent of Syria's population, and their numbers were recently boosted by the arrival of refugees from Iraq. However, they were suddenly in massive decline.[491] Reliable figures regarding the extent of the Christian exodus were in short supply. In mid-2013 reports from Aleppo, for example, showed that within two years 30,000 Christians had fled the city, leaving perhaps as few as 150,000 behind.[492] Some displacement camps and refugee centres reported a disproportionate number of Christians.

Such reports suggested the crisis facing Christianity in Syria was worse than previously thought, with dire implications regarding its prospects for the future. Until recently, Syria had been a refuge for Christians sheltering from persecution elsewhere, notably Iraq. By coming to Syria and not emigrating to the West, they at least gave hope to the survival of Christianity in the Middle East. But events since 2010 have changed such hopes into doubt. By the summer of 2013, human rights observers were reporting that the "majority" of Iraqi Christians in Syria had fled. The signs

were that unless there was a dramatic change for the better, many if not most of Syria's indigenous Christians would do the same.[493] The Church in Syria, the survivor of severe persecution dating back almost to Christianity's beginnings, has clearly entered one of its most perilous periods.

June 2011: Four months after the spread of violence in Syria, Chaldean Bishop Antoine Audo SJ of Aleppo described the dangers of "insecurity and Islamisation". He warned of Syria following a path similar to Iraq, where continuing crisis caused the decimation of the Christian community. Bishop Audo said: "We do not want to become like Iraq. We don't want insecurity and Islamisation and have the threat of Islamists coming to power." He said that until now Syria "has a secular orientation" and that the people had "freedom". He was speaking after reports of a third refugee camp being set up on the border between Turkey and Syria with no sign of an end to the violence and instability.[494]

September 2011: A report stressed Christians' concern about the rise of Islamism in Syria, particularly among those who came to the country to escape a similar problem in Iraq. The report describes a visit to Our Lady of Saydnaya Church, in the mountains above Damascus, where Christians have worshipped for 1,400 years. Abu Elias, who attends the church, said: "We are all scared of what will come next." Another worshipper, Robert, explained that a year ago he had fled to Syria from Iraq, where he experienced sectarian strife. Now, he said, he may have to flee again.[495]

Summer 2011: Christians who fled their hometown of Qusayr described family members being killed by Islamists. They said rebels were not antagonistic towards Christians to begin with, but one female fugitive described how: "Last summer [2011] Salafists came to Qusayr, foreigners. They stirred the local rebels against us. They [preached] on Fridays in the mosques that it was a sacred duty to drive us away. We were constantly accused of working for the regime. And Christians had to pay bribes to the jihadists repeatedly in order to avoid getting killed." Christian families received almost daily threats. The family fled to Qa, Lebanon, but her husband drove back to Qusayr on 9th February 2012 to the mini-market he owned wanting to get food for his family. "He was stopped at a rebel checkpoint near the state-run bakery. The rebels knew he was a Christian. They took him and then threw his dead body in front of the door of his parent's house four or five hours later."[496]

January 2012: A secret report stated that Christians were being murdered and kidnapped as part of the violence spreading to key regions of Syria. The source, who could not be named for safety reasons, said the spate of attacks had taken place over three weeks after Christmas, and were motivated by factors including religious intolerance. According to the report, two Christian men, one aged 28, and the other a 37-year-old father with a pregnant wife, were kidnapped by rebels in separate incidents and were later found dead. The first was found hanged and the other was reportedly cut to pieces and thrown in a river. Four others were kidnapped and abducted – their captors threatening to kill them too.[497]

March 2012: At least 50,000 people, almost the entire Christian population of Homs, fled violence and persecution and sought sanctuary in neighbouring villages and towns outside the city. According to several reports, extremist members of the Faruq Brigade – which is part of the Free Syrian Army – went door to door in the Homs neighbourhoods of Hamidya and Bustan al-Diwan, targeting Christian homes. Fr Elias Aghia, the Superior General of the Missionaries of St Paul based in the Lebanese village of Harissa, told ACN that he had heard first-hand accounts from refugees of families being threatened: "Once the Islamist fanatics went in there was nothing the Christians could do. Where could they hide? Where could they go? The army could not protect them or send in tanks – the ancient streets are too small. Do not think this was an accident. There is a deliberate plan to isolate, cut off and destroy the Christian communities." Many mainstream Muslims were also told to leave by the soldiers. There were conflicting reports as to whether the Christians were given a chance to gather their belongings before leaving. The reports from Homs coincided with others from Aleppo detailing a car bomb targeting the Christian quarter of Aleppo, close to the Franciscan-run Church of St Bonaventure.[498]

August 2012: Gunmen attacked the Catholic monastery of Mar Musa, north of Damascus, they "stole everything they could steal, including tractors and other agricultural and farming tools" however no casualties were reported. The monastery was also attacked in February and April 2011.[499]

September 2012: Islamist extremists attacked the mostly Christian village of al-Hasaniya near the city of Homs, Syria. According to local TV, they killed five civilians and took 17 people hostage.[500]

September 2012: Rableh, a mostly Christian town, close to the border with Lebanon, was blocked for about two weeks by Syrian rebels, who refused to allow food or medical supplies in. Bridges around the settlement had

been blown up and roads were made impassable and snipers shot those attempting to enter or leave. "Three men who made attempts to leave the disaster zone were shot dead", said ACN's Fr Waldemar Cislo. Motorcyclists attempting to carry bread into the village were also shot at, although they managed to avoid the bullets.[501]

October 2012: Addressing a meeting in the House of Lords, Bishop Antoine Audo of Aleppo made an appeal for human rights and religious freedom. He said: "Aleppo, the city I love so much and where I have been bishop this past 20 years, is now devastated – much of it in ruins." Mentioning that people of all faiths had suffered, he stressed the plight of Christians, saying the exodus of faithful "would be a catastrophe". He said: "If we Christians in my country were reduced to a token few, it would be disastrous because, until now, ours has been one of the last remaining strong Christian centres in the whole of the Middle East. And so I ask: what is the future of Christianity in the Middle East now?"

October 2012: Greek Orthodox priest Fr Fadi Jamil Haddad, aged 44, was kidnapped and later found dead in Damascus. The married priest, who was parish priest of St Elias' Church, Qatana, was seized after setting off to negotiate the release of a parishioner, a doctor, who had been abducted a few days earlier. Fr Fadi was kidnapped with the doctor's father-in-law, whose fate is unknown. Fr Fadi's abductors demanded a huge ransom (equivalent to €550,000 (£475,000)) but killed him anyway. Six days after his abduction, his body was found on a road in the Drousha area of Damascus with what the Orthodox Patriarchate in Damascus described as "indescribable" signs of torture and mutilation on his body, with his eyes gouged out. Thousands attended his funeral at St Elias' Church the following day. During the service a bomb exploded. Two civilians and some soldiers were killed. In a statement, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch called Fr Haddad a "martyr of reconciliation and harmony". As yet, it is not clear who killed Fr Haddad.[502]

April 2013: Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregorios III of Antioch detailed atrocities against Christians since the conflict began in early 2011. He said 1,000 Christians had been killed, that "entire villages have been cleared of their Christian inhabitants" and that more than 40 churches and other religious buildings had been damaged or destroyed. In a desperate appeal for dialogue, he said: "The whole of Syria has become a battlefield… Every aspect of democracy, human rights, freedom, secularism and citizenship is lost from view and no-one cares."[503]

April 2013: Greek Orthodox Archbishop Boulos Yazigi and Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim were seized near the city of Aleppo, becoming the most senior Church figures to be targeted in Syria's civil war. The archbishops, who hold diocesan sees in Aleppo, were seized on their return from a humanitarian mission to a village close to Syria's border with Turkey. The driver of their vehicle was killed when they were ambushed by an armed group who forced them out of the car. Nobody has taken responsibility for kidnapping the archbishops but some sources claimed those responsible were 'Chechen jihadists' Two months later, with still little or no information about the kidnapped archbishops, a candlelit prayer vigil for the two prelates was held in Lebanon, led by Archbishop Yazigi's brother, Greek Orthodox Patriarch John X Yazigi. The patriarch said: "It hurts our soul to see what is happening in our homeland."[504]

June 2013: Fr Francis Mourad, 49, was killed when Islamist fighters attacked the Monastery of St Anthony in al-Ghasssinyah, a predominantly Christian village in Idlib province, Syria. Fr Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Custos of the Holy Land, said Fr Murad was a guest at the monastery and was shot dead while trying to defend people living in the convent, who included four nuns and 10 lay Christians. Initially there were conflicting reports about what happened, and in giving his account Fr Pizzaballa denied claims that Fr Mourad was one of three men shown being beheaded in an online video. Other reports had said the priest was killed by a stray bullet. See profile. [505]

June 2013: At least four people died and eight were injured when a bomber blew himself up while standing with people queuing for food and other basics outside a Muslim charity centre in Old Damascus. The blast in Bab Tuma did serious damage to the centre but the Greek Orthodox cathedral 54 yards (50 m) away was unscathed. Nobody claimed responsibility for the attack.[506]

July 2013: Fr. Paolo dall'Oglio, an Italian priest who had been working in Syria for 30 years, was kidnapped by the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant, a militant rebel group with links to Al-Qaeda. Fr dall'Oglio disappeared in the rebel-held city of Raqqa on Monday 29th. In August reports from activists in Syria that he had been killed were contradicted by the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, who claimed the priest was probably still alive. [507]

July 2013: June 2013: Two priests have given a report of the tragic suffering and death of Mariam, a 15-year-old girl, who was repeatedly raped by jihadists who overran her home city of Qusair, in the Homs

governorate. Unlike her family, Mariam was unable to escape when Jabhat al-Nusra seized Qusair and she was captured and forced into an Islamic marriage. The commander of Jabhat al-Nusra in Qusair married Mariam and raped her before repudiating her. The next day the young woman was forced to marry another Islamic militant. He too raped and repudiated her. The same thing happened for 15 days on each of which Mariam was raped by 15 different men. Mariam was killed after she displayed signs of mental illness. The atrocities took place after social networks spread a fatwa across the country produced by Salafist sheikh Yasir al-Ajlawni, who declared that it was lawful to rape any "non-Sunni Syrian woman" – including Alawites and Christians. The report about Mariam came from Fathers Issam and Elias, who returned to Qusair to reconsecrate the city's Catholic Church of St Elias, which had been ransacked and desecrated by the rebels and was used by them as a logistic and residential base.[508]

September 2013: Opposition troops, including members of the al-Qaida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra group, entered the Christian village of Maaloula on the night of Wednesday 4th. Maaloula was taken after an al-Nusra fighter blew himself up at a regime checkpoint at the entrance to the village, about 40 miles (60 km) northeast of Damascus. It was home to 3,300 residents, some of whom still spoke a dialect of Aramaic, the language believed to have been spoken by Jesus. There were reports of soldiers entering Christians' homes and demanding that they convert to Islam. Maaloula has several historically important churches and monasteries, including the Covent of St Takla. Inscriptions in caves in the mountainside on which the town sits indicate it is one of the world's earliest centres of Christianity. One nun told Associated press how about 100 people from the village took refuge in the convent. The 27 orphans who live there had been taken to the nearby caves overnight "so they were not scared."[509]

# Tanzania

| Population | Religions | Christian Pop. |
|---|---|---|
| 45 million | Christian 53.2%<br>Muslim 31.6%<br>Indiginous 13.4%, Other 1.8% | 24 million |

The arrest of an Islamist preacher following an acid attack on two British teenage girls on the Tanzanian island of Zanzibar highlighted concerns about the rise of intolerance. Sheikh Issa Ponda Issa, who was arrested in connection with the attack on Kristie Trup and Katie Gee, was later found to have incited his followers to protest violently against 'colonisation' by Christians.[510] The August 2013 assault on the two 18-year-olds coincided with growing fears that the government in Tanzania was losing the struggle against fundamentalist rebels. The May 2013 bombing of a Catholic church, which killed three people and injured 67, brought to a head growing concerns about the growth of Islamism in the country. The attack was significant as it took place on the Tanzanian mainland as opposed to the Zanzibar archipelago. Islam is in the majority in Zanzibar, where there is a background of inter-religious tensions. One charity monitoring Christian persecution suggested that, if successful, extremists would "threaten the presence of the Church" in Zanzibar, stating: "On the Zanzibar archipelago, Islamic militants bent on wiping out all Christians from the islands have burnt and looted churches and threatened Christians with death. The push for the spread of Islam is less violent but equally persistent on the mainland."[511] Bishops and other Christian leaders have warned of the spread of fundamentalists coming in from Saudi Arabia, which is relatively close to the east African country. Journalists and religious freedom commentators have stated that in Tanzania and elsewhere in Africa extremist groups are now targeting Christians who exist as the majority religious group.

The rise of Islamism in Tanzania represents a growing headache for the country's President Jakaya Kikwete. He faced calls from Christians to clampdown on religious hatred and violence during his summer 2013 meeting with US President Barack Obama, who visited Tanzania at the end of a tour of the region. Tanzania's constitution recognises freedom of religion including the right to change one's beliefs. The document also forbids state interference in religious matters. Tanzania's secular administration looks set to come under increasing pressure as a result of extremist violence. The government will be anxious to step-up security

even at the risk of deterring tourists who, at 100,000 per year, are a mainstay of the economy.

September 2011: Yusuf Abdalla, 23, fled to Moshi, mainland Tanzania, after a severe beating from family members, which took place after a series of incidents following his conversion from Islam to Christianity. His landlady evicted him for converting, insisting that before he left he burnt the rubbish in his room. He was not aware that in his rubbish was a small copy of the Qur'an. He fled for his life, but not before receiving a beating from family members to his head, hand, and torso, and a serious mouth wound.[512]

October 2012: Bishop Bernadin Mfumbusa of Kondoa warned that religious freedom and other civil liberties were under threat from intolerant radical Muslim influences sweeping in from countries neighbouring the east African nation. In an interview with ACN, the bishop said: "We see more and more itinerant preachers from Saudi Arabia and Sudan entering this country – and Muslims are increasingly making political demands." He said verbal attacks were on the increase and warned of tension in the years ahead.[513]

February 2013: A Catholic priest was shot dead on his way to a church for a Sunday service in the capital of Zanzibar. Mohammed Mhina, a police spokesman, said: "Father Evarist Mushi was blocked by two young men at the entrance of the church where one of the attackers shot him in the head." The killing came a few days after reports emerged that Protestant Pastor Mathayo Kachili was beheaded by Muslim extremists. Police commander Denis Stephano said the killing in Buseresere town was sparked by Muslim calls for Christian butchers to close down their shops.[514]

May 2013: Three people were killed and more than 30 injured in a grenade attack on St Joseph's Catholic Church in the Olasisti suburb of Arusha. The attack took place as Mass got underway in the newly-built church. Present at the service was the Apostolic Nuncio (Vatican ambassador) to Tanzania, who was unharmed. The assault was blamed on Islamist militants and has raised concerns about Muslim-Christian relations in parts of the country. Four Saudis and two Tanzanians were arrested in connection with the atrocity, fuelling concerns that extremism is coming in from Saudi Arabia.[515]

June 2013: Protestant Pastor Robert Ngai was rushed to hospital with serious cuts and gashes to his arms and hands, injuries received when extremists broke into his home, one of whom wielded a machete. The incident took place on a Sunday night when the Islamists broke into the house in Geita town. Doctors at the local hospital were unable to treat the pastor's injuries and he was transferred to a large hospital in the nearest city, Buseresere.[516]

July 2013: Christians in Tanzania called on President Barack Obama to speak out against acts of persecution on the eve of his visit to their country at the end of his tour of the continent. Author Raymond Ibrahim warned: "A resurgent Islamic mentality is… just everywhere and it is now in Tanzania of course which earlier you never thought of as an Islamic nation." [517]

September 2013: Elderly Catholic priest, Joseph Anselmo Mwag'ambwa, was hospitalised with severe burns, after having acid thrown at him as he was leaving an internet cafe in Stone Town the old part of Zanzibar City, on the afternoon of Friday 13th. According to one local report, Fr Mwang'amba had just received a call from an unknown number on his mobile phone and was attacked as he left to answer the call. Police spokesman Mohamed Mhina told Reuters: "He sustained burns in his face and shoulders. The acid burnt through his shirt."[518]

# Turkey

| Population | Religions | Christian Population |
|---|---|---|
| 75 million | Muslim 97%<br>Christian 0.3%<br>Other 2.7% | 150,000[519] |

While there are signs of improvement concerning the rights of minority religious groups, many of the old problems remain, leaving commentators divided in their assessment of the country. Turkey has been reclassified by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in its 2013 report, so that it is no longer a Country of Particular Concern. But this move was highly controversial, being criticised by one of USCIRF's former Vice Chairs, Dr Elizabeth H. Prodromou, who said the change was "based on the patently false claim that 'Turkey is moving in a positive direction with regard to religious freedom.'"[520]

Government authorities have announced restitution or compensation for property seized by the state from three non-Islamic minorities recognised by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne: Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox and Jews. The move also promises to restore a number of places of worship including numerous Greek Orthodox churches and monasteries on the Island of Imbro, and the Armenian Catholic Church in Diyarbakir. Additionally, the Greek Orthodox Church of St Nicolas, destroyed in 1960, will be rebuilt in Bodrum (a popular tourist destination in south-western Turkey), according to an agreement signed by the mayor of Bodrum and members of the municipal assembly. However there are still significant problems with regard to property. The Greek Orthodox seminary of Halki, on the island of Heybeli, is still closed after more than 40 years. The Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I, turned down a government offer to reopen Halki but as part of the state education system. The Syriac Orthodox Church lost several appeals in its ongoing court battle to keep the land belonging to the ancient Mar Gabriel monastery.

The Armenian community, which is predominantly Christian, remains in a precarious situation, and continues to endure sporadic violent attacks. Article 301 of the 2005 Penal Code, which punishes insults to the Turkish state by up to two years' imprisonment, prohibits commemorations of anti-Christian atrocities from the Ottoman period, including the "Armenian Genocide," a programme of ethnic cleansing targeting Armenians,

Assyrians, Greeks and other predominantly Christian minorities in order to establish an exclusively Muslim state.

All aspects of religious affairs overseen by the *Diyanet*, e.g. all jobs related to religion (teachers of religion, ministers etc), depend on this department for their appointments, training and salaries. This extends to Christian communities, even though constitutionally its role is described as "to execute the works concerning the beliefs, worship, and ethics *of Islam*, enlighten the public about their religion, and administer the sacred worshipping places." (Italics mine)[521] Christians and Jews are not represented on the *Diyanet*. The Turkish government continues to interfere in the Greek Orthodox Church's Holy Synod, insisting that only Turkish citizens can be members. However, it has granted citizenship to 21 foreign nationals so they can join the synod, which elects the Greek Orthodox Patriarch.[522]

Christians not covered by the Treaty of Lausanne do not have any legal status, and cannot legally own or manage their own schools, social centres or seminaries, nor can they build churches – this includes Roman Catholics, Syriac Orthodox and Protestants. Mgr Louis Pelâtre, the Roman Catholic Vicar Apostolic of Istanbul said, "Our real problem remains our basic property, we have no ownership papers and have never had any. This is not an easy situation. I am not recognised as a bishop, I can open a bank account in my own name but not in the name of my diocese".

January 2011: The Ankara Court of Cassation ordered that the land owned by the ancient Mar Gabriel Syriac-Orthodox monastery be registered in the name of the state Treasury. Since 2008 the state has challenged the ownership of the monastery in the Tour-Abdine region of Western Turkey, where there are three monks, fourteen nuns and about forty Christian students. In 2009 the land registry courts in Mydiat found in favour of the Syriac Orthodox Church.

June 2011: For the first time in 50 years, a Christian – Erol Dora, an Evangelical Protestant – was elected to parliament for the constituency of Mardine (south-eastern Turkey).

June and July 2011: The Syriac Orthodox Church (not recognised by the Treaty of Lausanne) obtained permission to worship in two of their Churches – one in Alexandrette (Iskanderun in Turkish), capital of the province with the same name, and the other in Adiyaman, also a provincial capital and the metropolitan seat of the Syriac Catholic Church. This was

the first time since the Ottoman Empire they were able to reopen their churches.

October 2011: St Giragos Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church, in the Gavur (Turkish for "infidel") district of Diyarbakir, celebrated services for the first time in more than 30 years. On 23rd October more than 3,000 visitors crowded into the seventeenth-century building, the Armenian Church's largest church in the Middle East, for Sunday Mass. The following day 10 ethnic Armenians, who had been raised as Sunni Muslims, were baptised in a private ceremony. The Church building was virtually abandoned after 1915, when worshippers were killed or deported. It is estimated that at least 300,000 Armenian or Syriac Christians converted to Sunni or Alawite Islam after 1915 to avoid forced deportation. Over the past decade, both Armenian and Syrian Orthodox church centres in Turkey have quietly baptised individuals and families who had Muslim IDs but wished to return to their Christian roots.[523]

August 2011: Following international pressure, Prime Minister Recep Tayip Erdogan announced, on 27th August, that religious groups had a year to present requests for restitution or compensation of assets seized from religious minorities in 1923, 1936 and 1960. This only applies to the three non-Islamic minorities recognised by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne: Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox and Jews. More than 1,000 properties were confiscated from the Greek Orthodox Church and about 30 from the Armenians in the specified years. The proposed restitution of Church property does not take into account assets seized from the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church at the time of the 1915 genocide, leading the Armenian Catholicos, Aram I, to describe the decree as "partial and unfair".

November 2011: The Church of Santa Sofia in Nicea, where Ecumenical Councils were held in 325 and in 787, was returned to its former use as a mosque. It had been a museum since it was restored from its ruined state in 2007. The church became a mosque in 1331, when Muslim forces conquered the city, but it was destroyed during Turkish war of independence in 1920.

December 2011: The US House of Representatives adopted a measure (H.Res.306) calling upon Turkey to return seized Church properties, and end repression of existing Churches. Ed Royce, who championed the measure, said: "Despite Prime Minister Erdogan's recent claims of

progress on religious freedom, Turkey's Christian communities continue to face severe discrimination."[524]

December 2011: New history textbooks were condemned by Christian MP Erol Dora for containing expressions of hatred towards Armenians and Assyrians – ethnic groups which are largely Christian.[525]

December 2011: A report detailing the problems faced by Turkey's Syriac Christian communities was presented to the European Parliament. "Syriacs in a Multi-Cultural Environment and the Right of Property" looked at a number of issues, including the unresolved murders of Syriacs during the 1980s and 1990s.[526]

February 2012: Patriarch Bartholomew I made a deposition before the parliamentary commission drafting a new Constitution – the first time the Turkish state had invited official input from religious minorities since the founding of the republic. On the 21st February the Patriarch handed in an 18-page document summarising the requests made by the non-Muslim communities recognized by the state, which amount to about 100,000 members. Bartholomew I said: "We wish this constitution to be the charter of all citizens. We do not wish to be considered second-class citizens. We do not wish to be treated differently, but equally. We want theological schools to be reopened, we want freedom of conscience and religion. In the past I visited many ministers and even the prime minister, and was always received with good intentions, but promises have not always been kept."

February 2012: More than 20,000 people participated in the anti-Armenian protests, with professionally printed signs that read, "You are all Armenians, You are all bastards," and "Today Taksim, Tomorrow Yerevan: We will descend upon you suddenly in the night." Among the speakers at the demonstration in Taksim Square was Turkish Interior Minister Idris Naim Sahin.[527]

May 2012: Thousands of Muslims prayed outside the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, calling for it to be returned to its former use as a mosque – the building has been used as a museum since 1934, but from the sixth century until 1453 it was an Eastern Orthodox basilica. To avoid inter-religious tensions the law prohibits it from being used for religious purposes either Christian or Islamic. The government has rejected requests from both Christians and Muslims to hold formal prayers at the site. Salih Turhan, head of the Anatolian Youth Association, which organised the event, told those present: "Keeping Hagia Sophia Mosque

closed is an insult to our mostly Muslim population of 75 million. It symbolises our ill-treatment by the West".[528]

July 2012: The Court of Cassation ruled that land which has been part of the fifth-century Mor Gabriel Monastery for 1,600 years is not its property, but rather belongs to neighbouring villages. The lawsuit brought by the villages' Islamic Kurdish leaders also accused the Syriac monks of practising "anti-Turkish activities" by providing an education to young people, including non Christians, and stated that the church was built over the ruins of a mosque, even though it was founded the century before Mohammed was born. Daily newspaper Zaman alleged that the judges had lost documents "proving that the land in question belonged to the monastery".[529]

September 2012: Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, speaking during a visit to Sarajevo, Bosnia, said "[T]he West hasn't recognised Islamophobia as a crime against humanity – it has encouraged it", and called for international laws against religious defamation.[530]

December 2012: An 84-year-old Armenian woman was murdered in the Koca Mustafa Pasha neighbourhood of Istanbul. Marissa Kuchuk (Küçük) was found dead by her daughter, Zadik Kuchuk. The woman had been stabbed seven times and her throat had been slit. A cross was carved on her chest using a sharp object, suggesting that the murder may have been religiously motivated.[531]

December 2012: At the end of 2012 it was announced that the 300-year-old Hagia Yorgi Greek Church in Alanya district will be restored and used for religious services for all the Christian groups in the region – as well as serving as a cultural centre. Alanya's Mayor, Hasan Sipahioğlu, told Hürriyet Daily News that the recently enacted municipalities law gave local authorities the power to take such initiatives. Sipahioğlu added: "The Christians living in Alanya used to worship in places they rented. With this project, we will open the church for the service of all the Christians living in our district, without discrimination between Orthodox Christians, Protestants, and Catholics."[532]

January 2013: Murat Altun was sentenced to 15 years in prison for the murder of Bishop Luigi Padovese, the Vicar Apostolic of Anatolia, who was killed in 2010. At the time, the killing was believed to be religiously motivated. According to first-hand testimonies Altun shouted "Allah Akbar. I have killed the great Satan" after the killing.

January 2013: A plot to kill Pastor Emre Karaali of the Izmit Protestant Church was foiled by Turkish counter-terrorism units that arrested 14 suspects who planned to attack Christians during a series of evangelical meetings in January. Two of those arrested had been attending the pastor's church for more than a year in order to become close to the minister and his wife.[533]

April 2013: Erdal Dogan, a lawyer supporting relatives of three murdered Christians, received death threats. Turkish citizens Necati Aydin and Ugur Yuksel and a German citizen Tillman Geske were tortured and killed at the offices of Zirve Publishing House, a Christian publisher in Malatya, allegedly by five young Muslims, on 18th April 2007. Mr Dogan said: "This is not the first threat I have received as a result of this case. But this one is significantly different from the other ones and seemed to be an imminent danger."[534]

# Turkmenistan

| Population | Religions | Christian Population |
|---|---|---|
| 5.1 million | Muslim 87%<br>Christian 2.5%<br>Other 10.5% | 127,500 |

Described as "the most closed country within the former Soviet Union", Turkmenistan retains tight control over every aspect of Church life and practice.[535] Despite some concessions to religious groups, the practice of Christianity and other faiths remains highly restricted. Although there has been some progress since the 2006 change of president, cases are still reported of confiscation of Bibles, arbitrary closure of churches and sometimes the arrest of Christians.

Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov has down-played the semi-religious cult that surrounded his father until his death in 2006. But since he took over, Berdimuhamedov has been accused of not doing enough to reduce presidential power. Dissident activity is not tolerated and the Turkmen people are still a long way from enjoying true freedom of speech. Most significantly, the 2003 religion law remains in place, imposing severe restrictions on religious activity.

Leading human rights organisations have described the country's religious freedom record as "extremely poor"[536] despite a constitution that appears to enshrine the right of individuals and communities to practise their faith freely.

In spring 2012 the Turkmen government told the UN that 128 individual religious communities were now registered, including 13 Russian Orthodox groups, one Catholic, one Baptist and one Pentecostal. But registered faith groups are heavily restricted. The state reserves the right to monitor them and scrutinise their activities, including attending meetings, reading all their documents and checking their accounts.

Printing religious literature is banned by government decree and religious groups can only import it under strict conditions. Such conditions include evidence to show that there are enough intended recipients to warrant the quantity received. Each Turkmen citizen returning to the country can only carry one copy of a religious tract such as the Bible and they must demonstrate that it is for personal use only. Severe restrictions remain in

place concerning people visiting the country for religious reasons and the government tightly controls clerical appointments of whatever significance, national or local. Intrusive registration criteria insist that the government be informed of all financial support for religious groups. Registered communities are forbidden from holding services in their homes. Indeed worship is only allowed in venues specifically licensed for the purpose.

The government's practical commitment to religious freedom came under fire when the US Commission on International Religious Freedom called the regime to account for failing to act on longstanding proposals to improve religious freedom and other aspects of human rights.

Prompting such criticisms are reports that, despite the increase in registered religious groups, they face the same problems as unregistered ones, notably harassment of their faithful. In one case, a registered faith group was required to change locations as many as 12 times in one year. Christians practising their faith in places lacking official government authorisation are subject to imprisonment and large fines. In a country with one of the highest prisoner-to-population ratios, the arrest of Christians and other faith groups is commonplace and, according to one UN report, "torture is widespread and occurs with impunity".[537]

Unregistered religious communities are forbidden from holding religious activities, including literature distribution and religious education. They risk having their meetings raided and their property confiscated and are liable to fines and imprisonment. Pastors and their congregations have sometimes been abused or beaten by authorities.[538] Unregistered religious groups are forbidden to rent, purchase or construct places of worship. Recognised groups face grave difficulties obtaining permission to register a building for religious use.

January 2011: Police officers carried out a raid on a private flat in Turkmenabad where a group of Protestants were praying.[539]

February 2012: Protestant pastor Ilmurad Nurliev was released after 19 months in the Seydi prison camp, on condition that he continue to report to police regularly. He was sentenced to four years' imprisonment in 2010 on charges of fraud, which he denies. He was not allowed the right to appeal his case and while imprisoned was reportedly placed in a cell with an inmate with tuberculosis and was denied his diabetes medication and a Bible.[540]

September 2012: Police carried out a clampdown on religious activity across the country, particularly involving Protestants. In Dashoguz, a 75-year-old Baptist man was dragged from his house and his 68-year-old wife was beaten. That same month, police raided a Protestant prayer meeting in Dashogouz, fining three participants, including a visiting dual Russian-Turkmen citizen, who was subsequently prevented from leaving Turkmenistan at Ashgabat airport.[541]

November 2012: On an official visit to Armenia, President Berdymukhamedov visited the headquarters of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church. After the visit, Church officials noted: "Answering the appeal of His Holiness [Catholicos Karekin II], the President directed his government representatives present to discuss [the revival of the Church in Turkmenistan]."[542]

May 2013: A Christian woman landed herself and her Baptist community in eastern Lebap region in trouble after she was caught reading a Christian book at work. Her boss was called in and reported the woman to the authorities. A local government official and a police officer then visited the woman at home in Galkynysh village and demanded that she hand over all her religious books. Under intense questioning, the woman named another church member, whose home was also visited with a similar order made to hand over religious books. This person was forced to sign a statement that the books had come from Baptist leader Marmurad Mominov. He was summoned before local government officials and was told that he had violated the 2003 religion law and was required to hand over all his religious literature. On submitting the books, he was told they could not be returned as they did not have the stamp of approval. His computer was also seized. [543]

# Uzbekistan

| Population | Religions | Christian Population |
|---|---|---|
| 27.5 million | Muslim 85%<br>Christian 5%<br>Other 10% | 1.4 million |

As police seized two Bibles and a book by English Christian author John Bunyan, an officer told their owner: "Don't you know that it is prohibited to keep such books at home?"[544] This incident, reported by news agency Forum 18, was followed by statistics showing that at least 37 individuals – mostly Protestants – had their homes raided by police for possessing "illegal" religious literature between the end of January 2012 and the end of January 2013. The raids led to fines, confiscation of the books and in a few cases corrective labour. Since June 2006, laws have been in place which impose penalties "for the illegal production, conservation, importation and distribution of unauthorised religious literature." A 2006 government instruction limits the print run of any religious book to fewer than 1,000 copies – which must be produced by one of eight registered religious publishing houses, and approved by the official Council on Religious Affairs. With these measures in place the censoring of religious literature has intensified, with the courts frequently ordering the destruction of seized material.[545]

Articles 18, 31 and 61 of Uzbekistan's constitution guarantee freedom of religion for individuals and groups. However the November 2010 administrative code increased sanctions and introduced new punishments for illegal religious activity. Another law adopted in September 2011 authorises preventive detention for "alleged criminals in the course of investigating procedures" and facilitates the arrest and detention of those accused of "illegal religious activities". Uzbek prisons contain more than 7,000 prisoners of conscience, held because of their religious convictions.

The state exercises tight control on religious groups and their activities. Uzbekistan's National Security Service (in particular its anti-terrorism department), and the *mahallas* (neighbourhood-level administrations) are powerful tools in the hands of the state to exert control. The government justifies its restrictions on religious freedom by the need to fight religious extremism and terrorism.

Protestant groups face the most difficulties, including police raids. They are seen as "Western" or dangerous because they proselytise. Believers

gathering in the privacy of their homes can be subject to legal penalties, including prison. The Baptist Union is registered in Uzbekistan, along with 20 other Christian Churches, but about 30 affiliated congregations are unable to register, as they do not meet minimum requirements, ie having at least 100 members. Uzbekistan's tiny Catholic Church has not faced similar problems so far, and according to one source conditions are "relatively good" for the Church. However, Bishop Jerzy Maculewicz pointed to restrictions in proclaiming the Faith, "because the law prohibits all missionary activities. For this reason, we are forced to limit ourselves and work inside our churches. We welcome and catechise people who come to us, but we cannot announce the Gospel in public".

March 2011: Six Baptists leading Sunday worship in an old peoples' home near Tashkent faced criminal and administrative charges after a service was raided as part of an "anti-terror operation". Deputy police chief Major Sofar Fayziyev – who took part in the raid – told the Forum 18 news service: "They could not produce any proof that they had authorisation for their activity."[546]

April 2011: A Baptist Church in the capital, Tashkent, was searched by police, who accused the Church officials of running an unauthorised "Bible school" and illegally possessing, printing and selling Christian books. Police confiscated more than 53,000 books and leaflets together with computers and other office equipment. Fines equivalent to 50 and 100 times the minimum monthly salaries were imposed on three Church leaders and another member of the congregation. In the same month, a Baptist in Tashkent was physically assaulted by police and fined for having given a childrens' Bible to a work colleague.

April 2011: A court ordered that Christian literature – including three rare editions of the Bible – be destroyed. They were seized from an atheist man, Vyacheslav Shinkin, and his wife Snezhana Galiaskarova. His father Vladimir Shinkin, from Tashkent, appealed to numerous state agencies – right up to President Islam Karimov – in a bid to have charges of holding religious meetings, made against his son and his daughter-in-law, quashed and the books returned. The couple received fines totalling 110 times the minimum monthly wage. Mr Shinkin's daughter-in-law inherited the literature from her late father.[547]

June 2011: A police officer in Tashkent threatened to kill local Protestant Anvar Rajapov if he continued challenging a fine of 80 times the minimum

monthly wage. According to Forum 18 news service, Major Zufar Rashidovwas was quoted as saying: "I have prepared an axe for you, which will be flying after you, observing you, and if need be kill you."[548]

August 2011: Police broke into the private home of a Protestant family in Fergana, assaulting the father and confiscating a Bible and New Testament.

October 2011: Two schoolgirls stopped going to a Baptist church after police threatened that "they will be in police records and thrown out of school". Under pressure from authorities, the two girls wrote statements against their pastor, Vyacheslav Gavrilov. The congregation in Angren, Tashkent Region – which is officially registered – was raided twice on 16th October. Subsequently members of the community were taken down to the police station.[549]

November 2011: A visit to Uzbekistan by the Russian Orthodox Patriarch, Kirill, scheduled for November 2011, was blocked by Uzbek authorities.

January 2012: Captain Ruzi Nazarov, one of the police officers accused of beating up Protestant man Shokir Rahmatullayev during a raid on the Christian's home in Jarkurgan in Surkhandarya Region, denied that violence was used. Reports claimed that police chief Bahrom Tursunov beat Rahmatullayev, threatened to frame him with a false murder charge, and said his mother would become Tursunov's concubine. Rahmatullayev was allegedly told by the police chief that he was "helping Russians to take over Uzbekistan".[550]

May 2012: On the pretext that they were searching for a bomb, police and the NSS secret police raided a Protestant prayer meeting at a private home in Yukori-Chirchik. Police confiscated religious books and a laptop. 14 members of the unregistered Protestant Church were subsequently fined for holding an "unsanctioned meeting in a private home". Natalya Kim, the owner of the house where the meeting was taking place, was fined 60 times the minimum monthly salary.[551]

September 2012: Police raided the home of Valentina Pleshakova and her disabled daughter Natalya in Tashkent, beating Natalya and removing religious literature. Taking the Russian Orthodox girl to the police station, officers pressured her to adopt Islam. She was freed in the early hours of the following morning, but both mother and daughter were heavily fined and confiscated literature was ordered to be destroyed. After Metropolitan Vikenty, head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Uzbekistan, intervened,

the fine was changed on appeal into an official warning, but no books were returned.[552]

September 2012: Three Bailiffs from Navoi Regional Court seized Artur and Irina Alpayev's dining table, refrigerator, piano and DVD player on 11th September. The couple, members of an unregistered Baptist Church, refused to pay a fine imposed on 9th June by Judge Oltinbek Mansurov of Navoi City Criminal Court for illegally keeping Christian books in their flat. The family's washing machine had already been seized on 8th August. The couple have five children.[553]

November 2012: In Tashkent Region a Protestant was fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage for allegedly illegally distributing religious literature including Bibles. Local Protestants highlighted irregularities in legal procedures, after the official who produced "expert analyses" allegedly managed to read 1,300 books, 2,100 brochures, 450 leaflets, 50 magazines, watch 200 videos, and listen to 350 audio cassettes within one working day. "This beats the Guinness Book of Records", a local Protestant told Forum 18 news service.[554]

December 2012: Police raided a group of about 80 Protestants holidaying together. Charges were brought under six different articles of the Code of Administrative Offences against four members of the group. Police confiscated three Bibles and 100 Christian songbooks, insulted the group, and took the fingerprints of all present. People must worship "only in registered places specifically set up for religious purposes", police told Forum 18.[555]

March 2013: A 76-year-old woman suffering from Parkinson's Disease was fined 10 times the monthly minimum wage and ordered to destroy religious books and DVDs in her possession. Naziya Ziyatdinova was forcibly removed from her bed and her house searched by four officials who entered her house via the window at around 11am on the 14th March. She has been called to court on several occasions. After one hearing an ambulance had to be called for.[556]

April 2013: About 15 officers raided a Baptist congregation's Sunday morning service in a private home in Karshi, Kashkadarya Region. Police loaded those present – 78 adults and children – onto buses bound for the police station, where they were held for more than three hours. According to Forum 18 news service, officers swore at their captives and even threatened to shoot them during their detention. The head teachers of the schools where the children were studying were brought to the station. The

next day Viktoriya Tashpulatova, who was seized with her seven children, was summoned to their school.[557]

May 2013: Sharofat Allamova, a Protestant from Urgench, was given 18 months' corrective labour, after being convicted of the "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious literature", following a police raid on her flat in December 2012. Ms Allamova is alleged to have visited neighbours and given them English-language DVDs called "The Story of Jesus for Children", as well as sweets and a postcard bearing the words "Merry Christmas" in English. It was reported she said "May the Lord Jesus save you" to her neighbours. Finding her actions suspicious, neighbours reported her to the local *mahalla,* who concluded she was a "member in an illegal Jesus Christ sect" and passed the DVDs to police. Corrective labour means she will be placed in a low-paid state job, and 20 per cent of her salary will be paid to the state during her sentence. She needs state permission to travel within the country, and is banned from leaving it.[558]

July 2013: Religious literature, including Bibles and *Qur'an*s, was confiscated from four pensioners living in a village near the capital, Tashkent. The four were fined a combined total of 230 times the country's minimum monthly wage. One local Protestant – who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals – told Forum 18 of cases where individuals have reluctantly destroyed their own Christian books, including Bibles: "I personally know of three such cases. Many other Christians said to me they can't bring themselves to destroy their Bibles."[559]

August 2013: The state tried to seize Baptist Union land used to run summer camps for children and families. The state claimed that the land owned by the registered group, was purchased "illegally" in 2000. Baptists complained to the Prosecutor-General that "the future of Uzbekistan cannot be built on the plundering of religious organisations".[560]

# Vietnam

| Population | Religions | Christian Pop. |
|---|---|---|
| 87 million | Buddhist 49%, Atheist 20%<br>Christian 8.5%<br>Other 22%[561] | 6.5 million |

While Decree 92, which came into effect on 1st January 2013, enshrines "a citizen's freedom of religion", most of its provisions expand the government's oversight and control of religious activity. Most notably it now requires groups to obtain permission for "religious meetings" and tightens rules on the registration of religious groups. Permission for religious activities now depends on groups having "doctrines, articles of faith, rites and ceremonies that support the nation and do not contradict fine traditions and customs." Registration requires at least 20 years of "stable" religious meetings, which one commentator interpreted as meaning a spotless criminal and administrative record in the eyes of commune-level peoples' committees. Protestant lawyer and activist Nguyen Van Dai concluded that one goal of the legislation was to abolish the house-church movement which started in 1988 and remains largely unregistered.[562]

Decree 92 was designed to refine previous legislation: the Decree on Religion 22/2005/CP (Decree 22) and the Prime Minister's Special Instructions no.1 Regarding Protestantism. It also introduced the need for clergy and believers travelling abroad for religious reasons to obtain permission from the central Government Committee of Religious Affairs in Hanoi. Religious activities outside a legal church establishment are now more closely scrutinized and the authorities require 15 working days to consider an application for any activities involving non members of the church.

In 2012 new problems emerged for Christian groups in the Central Highlands, following a directive from the Ministry of the Interior's Committee on Religious Affairs clamping down on small house churches and stopping them from affiliating with established organisations. Leaders in the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam, which is registered, and house churches in the provinces of Dak Lak, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, Binh Phuoc, Phu Yen, and Dak Nong, experienced increased government scrutiny for alleged association with separatist groups overseas. Religious

leaders also reported increased threats and restrictions on proselytism and pressure on new converts to recant their faith.[563]

Special police units in the Central Highlands have assisted local police in detaining and interrogating suspected Dega Protestants and Ha Mon Catholics – groups who are allegedly working towards an independent Montagnard state. Alleged separatists have been beaten, detained, forced to renounce their faith, and several have died in custody or disappeared. Catholic Bishop Michael Hoang Duc Oanh of Kontum has complained that authorities are intimidating ethnic minority Catholics and priests, and blocking his visits to ethnic minority villages.[564] The Montagnards are targeted because they cooperated with the US during the Vietnam War. For similar reasons the Hmong in the mountainous north-west region suffer severe abuses and restrictions on religious freedom. Vietnam's 790,000 Hmong live below the poverty line; many are Catholic or Protestant. The government severely limits access to theological training in the region and continues to refuse official permission for the Bible to be printed in Hmong.[565]

The Catholic Church has experienced numerous violations of religious freedom, including Masses being interrupted, members of the faithful jailed, attacks on the faithful and seminarians, religious buildings and Church-owned land seized. Like China, the Vietnamese government established a Patriotic Association independent of the Vatican. Out of more than 2,800 priests in Vietnam, only a few hundred have joined the Vietnam Committee for Catholic Solidarity, members of which are frequently critical of the Vatican. However the committee's impact on the Catholic Church has been minimal and the Vietnamese government has not succeeded in dividing the church.

Despite pressure from state authorities, Catholicism is growing. New places of worship have been built and increasing numbers are entering seminaries and convents. Official figures from the Holy See indicate that in the last five years, more than 1,500 young people entered seminaries and the consecrated life, a rise of 50 percent. The Holy See and Vietnam re-established diplomatic contacts in 2011 – after more than 30 years – with Mgr Leopoldo Girelli appointed as non-residential papal representative for Vietnam, as well as apostolic nuncio to Singapore and apostolic delegate to Malaysia and Brunei. His appointment coincided with the end of the Jubilee of the Vietnamese Catholic Church on January 6th 2011, which was marked by a closing ceremony at the National Marian Shrine in La Vang that drew more than 500,000 of the faithful.

January 2011: The Da Nang People's Court upheld the imprisonment of six Catholics, who had been convicted for clashes with police in May 2010 during the attempt to seize land. Their cemetery and homes were seized to make way for a luxury tourist resort. In the days preceding the appeal, Vietnamese Catholics held prayer vigils, especially in Thai Ha Parish, Hanoi, which had also experienced government land grabbing.[566]

April 2011: 49 people were killed and hundreds were arrested, when security forces and soldiers from the Vietnam People's Army violently broke up a peaceful rally. About 8,500 people, mostly Protestants and Animist Hmong, had come together to pray and demand reforms and religious freedom on the 30th.[567]

May 2011: Speaking about Fr Vincent Pham Van Tuyen, a priest who joined the Patriotic Association, one former parishioner told AsiaNews: "From the moment Fr Tuyen worked for the government, nobody wanted to go to him for confession, for fear that he would be reported to the police. We wondered if the sacraments he administered were valid or not. Being left for years without confession and communion little by little led us to go elsewhere".[568]

June 2011: Three Mennonite Christian activists in Vietnam were imprisoned following convictions for subversion. The men were part of a campaign calling for redress for farmers whose land was forcibly sold by the government to large corporations. Tran Thi Thuy received an eight-year prison sentence, Pastor Duong Kim Khai received six years and Nguyen Thanh Tam received two years.[569]

June 2011: The government upheld the decision to demolish all the homes within the vicinity of the 19th-century parish church in Con Dau.

July 2011: Authorities rearrested Fr Nguyen Van Ly and took him to Ha Nam prison in Kim Bãng District, Ha Nam Province. Fr Ly, a founder member of Bloc 8406, a movement that calls for the end of Vietnam's one-party system, was sentenced to eight years in prison in 2007. Having experienced poor health, in March 2010 he was transferred to house arrest for a year at the Bishop's Residence. There, he continued to write letters criticising the Communist Party's violations of human rights.

July-August 2011: Nghe An provincial government decided, on 27th July, to turn the damaged church of Cau Ram and its grounds into a public park with a soldiers' monument. Previous plans to build private flats on the site

were shelved following two years of protesting by Catholics. The church was used as a military base during World War II and, after it was bombed by the US, the building was declared a "place of memory" to "preserve and protect for future generations, in memory of American war crimes." On 8th August more than 5,000 Catholics from Cau Ram, Yen Dai and Ke Gai parishes organised a mass demonstration in Hanoi demanding the return of the site, where there has been a church since the tenth century.

October-December 2011: Fr Joseph Nguyên Vãn Phuong, parish priest in Thai Ha, was summoned by the Dong Da Neighbourhood People's Committee on the 8th October and informed that a waste-water plant would be built on land owned by the Redemptorist Order. Local Catholics organised a protest against the seizure of the land and demonstrations and appeals followed. A group of more than a 100 people, including police and soldiers with dogs, burst into Thai Ha Monastery on the 3rd November, smashing down the front door. Fr John Luu Ngoc Quynh, Br Vincent Vu Van Bang and Br Nguyen Van Tang tried to stop the intruders but were beaten by police. The attack only stopped when thousands of Catholics from neighbouring parishes intervened. On 15th November local authorities invited representatives of the Catholic community to a meeting to resolve the dispute. Over the next few hours some 600 police agents and government officials occupied the Redemptorist parish and its land. On 16th November, authorities blocked the roads leading to the monastery, driving away anyone attempting to approach the church. Hundreds of faithful kept coming to Thai Ha to pray and venerate Our Lady of Perpetual Help, whose shrine is located there. Local Communist party officials stormed the monastery again, destroying a large crucifix visible throughout the surrounding area, throwing rubbish over the statue of the Virgin and desecrating the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist. On 2nd December Fr Joseph Nguyên Vãn Phuong and hundreds of parishioners went to the Hanoi People's Committee to present a formal complaint against acts of vandalism and illegal seizures. The authorities received them but when they left the building delegation members were surrounded by police, who arrested Fr Joseph Nguyên Vãn Phuong, Fr Lương Vãn Long and Br Vù vãn Bãng, as well as some 30 parishioners. They were released later the same day.[570]

November 2011: Thousands of people protested in front of the People's Committee building in Hanoi, demanding justice for Thai Ha parish and the Redemptorist monastery and denouncing the defamation campaign launched by state TV against the Catholic Church.

November 2011: A pipe bomb exploded causing serious damage to the site used for Catholic worship in Con Cuong.[571]

November 2011: A gang of men attacked senior members of Agape Baptist Church, meeting in a private house near Hanoi. During the attack on Sunday, 13th November the men beat Pastor Nguyen Danh Chau into unconsciousness and seriously injured more than a dozen people, including women and teenagers. The Christians were meeting at Pastor Chau's home in Lai Tao village, Bot Xuyen commune, My Duc District. Pastor Chau was warned that he would be killed if the Christians continued to gather.[572]

December 2011: Pierre Nguyên Dinh Cuong was abducted on his way to a friend's house on Christmas Eve. Three men in plain clothes handcuffed the young Catholic, bundled him into a taxi, and drove off. According to friends, the young man's abduction is the work of the security police. The young man had been involved with the John Paul II Centre for the Defence of Life. His case is similar to that of 15 other kidnap victims, nine of whom also hail from Vinh Diocese.

February 2012: Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh, a long-time government critic and religious freedom advocate from the Central Highlands, was sentenced to five years imprisonment for "distorting the domestic situation, criticizing the government and the army with foreign media".[573]

February 2012: Fr Luy Gonzaga Nguyên Quang Hoa was attacked by three men linked to local authorities as he returned home after celebrating a funeral Mass in Kon Hnong village, Kontum Province. In the attack, on 23rd November, he lost consciousness after being beaten around the head with steel rods.[574]

March 2012: Eight Hmong Protestants were sentenced to two years' imprisonment for "partaking in a separatist ethnic movement". They were arrested in May 2011 at a large religious gathering which was forcibly disbanded by police and military units.[575]

March 2012: Two Catholic activists, Vo Thi Thu Thuy and Nguyen Van Thanh, both accused of being linked to dissident priest Nguyen Van Ly, were sentenced to three and five years in prison.[576]

April 2012: A mob attacked Agape Family Orphanage in the Chuong My district of Hanoi, damaging the building, injuring several children, and beating Fr Nguyen Van Binh, the director of the orphanage, into unconsciousness. According to reports "at least 200 policemen arrived"

and assisted the mob in destroying the orphanage, which was said to be illegal.[577]

April 2012: Bishop Oanh was detained while trying to celebrate Easter Mass in the village of Kon Hnong, Kontum Province. During his interrogation, government officials said that parts of the province were "religion-free zones."[578]

May 2012: Ethnic Montagnard activists, Runh, Jonh, and Byuk, were arrested for affiliation with the unregistered Ha Mon Catholic group. They were charged with "undermining national unity." According to Human Rights Watch, more than 100 Montagnards were detained as part of a government-backed three-year programme, begun in 2010, to stop the spread of Dega Protestantism.[579]

May 2012: Four young Catholic activists – Dau Van Duong and Tran Huu Duc, 24, Chu Manh Son, 23, and Hoang Phong, 25 years old – were convicted by a court in Nghe An Province of "propaganda against the state" for distributing "anti-government leaflets." Thousands of Christian activists camped outside the courthouse awaiting the verdict. Human Rights Watch called for their release, claiming they were arrested for religious reasons. [580]

June-July 2012: Local authorities tried to prevent Catholics from worshipping in private homes in the Con Cuong and Quy Chau districts of Nghe An Province. Groups of unidentified young men regularly threw stones at worshippers and blocked roads leading to the houses. On 3rd July a mob beat several worshippers in Con Cuong, at least one severely. Officials reportedly have visited Catholics' homes, asking people to sign pledges not to "illegally celebrate Mass." Over the past months, police have targeted Catholic college students in the province with these pledges and a number of students have been beaten up by gangs.[581]

October 2012: Authorities in Quang Binh Province returned property formerly owned by the Catholic Church after decades of petitions from parishioners.[582]

November 2012: Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee granted the Catholic Church permission to run an orphanage for children living with HIV/AIDS. This is believed to be the first time the government has formally allowed religious control of social, health, or educational service provision.[583]

January 2013: The government demolished a former convent being used by the Sisters of St Paul de Chartres for various activities including a dispensary for the poor, a home for orphaned and disabled children, and shelter for young women in difficult situations. The state claims they will replace it with a hospital, but this is questioned by some Catholic sources. The Carmelite convent was seized by the Communist government in 1954 but since 2010 the authorities let the order use part of the building for its charitable work. The church and monastery, located on 72 Nguyën Thái Hoc Street, Hanoi, were more than a hundred years old.[584]

January-April 2013: The People's Court in Nghe An convicted 14 young Catholics and Protestants of subversion against the state on 10th January. Prosecutors said the students, all members of Viet Tan, a pro-democracy group, had taken part in "terrorist" activities. The court sentenced three – Hô Đúc Hòa, Đãng Xuân Diêu, Lê Văn Son – to 13 years in prison. The other 11 received sentences ranging from three to eight years. The young people from Nghê An and Thanh Hoa Provinces could have received the death penalty. Lawyers representing the Christians said their clients were tortured and forced into confessing. They were given leave to appeal, but in early April the Vietnamese Supreme Court adjourned their appeal trial to an unspecified date.[585]

# Yemen

| Population | Religions | Christian Population |
|---|---|---|
| 24 million | Muslim 99%<br>Other (including Christian)1% | 8,000 |

At numerous points during the period 2011-13, the Yemeni government seemed to be losing the struggle against fundamentalist rebels including Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula. The rebels' determination to impose a 'pure' vision of Islamic rule posed a direct threat to the country's already beleaguered Christian community. Not that Christians enjoyed many rights and privileges under the embattled regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was one of the many leaders who fell victim to the winds of popularist revolutionary change that spread across the Middle East and North Africa from the start of 2011. Declaring Islam to be the "state religion and *Shari'a* as the source of all legislation", the constitution enforced under Saleh did not protect religious freedom. Indeed, as leading human rights observers noted, "government practices restrict it."[586] For example, in 2013 the government continued to block plans for a church to be built on a plot of land in the capital, Sanaa, more than five years after the application was submitted. Freedom of worship for Yemen's small Christian community of around 8,000 was a question that divided experts. Some said religious services of all main Christian denominations took place without government interference in private homes, schools and elsewhere. Meanwhile Christian persecution observers noted that "most of the faithful worship underground".[587] Reports pointed to a difference in state attitudes to indigenous Christians, thought to number barely 2,500, many of whom practise their faith in secret, and non-native Christians, who number at least 6,000. There are possibly many more Christians who adopt Muslim names to avoid harassment in local society.

The pressures against Christians almost certainly were strongly influenced by the presence of Islamists, whose influence varied across the country. With the government weakened, particularly after Mr Saleh was badly injured by a rocket attack launched at the presidential palace, Islamist groups took full advantage and captured key areas, notably in the south. Here Al Qaeda imposed its strict interpretation of Islamic law. The US State Department reported "harassment, floggings, amputations and murder, including crucifixions", during the relatively brief occupation of the cities of Abyan. Al Qaeda forced all residents to pray at mosques five times a day,

harassed women on the streets for not wearing suitably modest dress and destroyed tombs perceived to be idolatrous.

The government may eventually have won back the cities of Abyan but its hold on power remained weak. By the end of November 2011, after reneging on numerous pledges to leave office, President Saleh finally handed over to his vice president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, ending 30 years in power. But any thought that the criticisms of fundamentalists and other dissidents would be assuaged by the change of leader were short-lived as the threat from Islamists continued. The appeal of Islamism was linked by many Yemen observers to the country's acute poverty; Yemen remains the poorest country in the Middle East. The ongoing Al-Qaeda insurgency and the country's widespread lack of infrastructure seemed set to mean a continuation of Yemen's problems and no end in sight to the particular woes faced by the country's Christians.

December 2011: Efforts are continuing to trace the whereabouts of a British engineer, only known as Tony, and a German couple, Joannes and Sabine Hentshel, and their son, Simon. The four were in a party of nine who were kidnapped outside the capital, Sanaa, more than two years ago. Simon was only aged 11 months when the incident happened during a day trip out of the city. The Hentshels' other children, Lydia, aged four, and three-year-old Anna, were eventually discovered and are now said to be fit and well. Others in the group who were killed included two German Bible School students, Anita Gruenwald, 24, and Rita Strumpp, 26. Both had been working at a hospital in Saada. The nurses were later implicated in Christian missionary activity in Yemen and a UK Sunday Times report of July 2009 revealed evidence that they had been warned against so-called missionary activity. Also killed was Young-sun I, a 34-year-old Christian woman.[588]

March 2012: The Yemeni branch of Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for the murder of US teacher Joel Shrum, 29, of Mount Joy, Pennsylvania because "he was trying to spread Christianity". The teacher of English at the International Training and Development Centre was shot dead in Taiz, Yemen's second city. A few days later, a radical website posted a message stating: "It was God's gift for the Mujahadeen to kill the American, Joel Shrum, who was proselytising under the cover of teaching in Taiz". However, the young man's parents said their son went to Yemen to learn Arabic, not carry out Christian evangelisation.

September 2012: A report released in Lebanon described how at least one man was crucified and two others were executed in Yemen by the jihadist group Ansar al-Sharia, which had taken control of Abyan province, Yemen. The jihadists accused the three Christians of being agents or spies for the US. Footage posted on the web showed a man crucified on an electric pylon. A sign, placed above the victim's head, quoted a verse from the *Qur'an* describing how those "who wage war" against Allah and the Prophet Mohammed "shall be killed or crucified… That is their disgrace in the world and a great torment is theirs in the hereafter" (Al-Ma'idah 5:33).[589]

January 2013: According to unconfirmed reports, there could be as many as 25,000 non-native Christians in Yemen, many of them refugees from countries including Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia, where the persecution of Christians is often even worse. In Somalia, Al-Shabaab ("the Youth") are reported to "behead Muslim apostates to Christianity on a regular basis".[590]

January 2013: Former diplomat Abdul-wahab Zabeba lost a last-minute bid to avoid deportation to Yemen,where he risked being killed for converting to Christianity. After the case in the Federal Court in Canada was dismissed, Mr Zabeba, 55 and his son, Mahir, 20, waited anxiously at an airport in Ottawa as their lawyer, Karima Karmali, applied for a temporary "stay of removal", so the matter could be reviewed. The application was based on new evidence showing that Zabeba would be in extreme danger in Yemen after word of the former diplomat's conversion spread through the country. A translated Toronto newspaper report about Zabeba's case appeared on various Yemeni online news sites for several months. The Rev Fred Demaray, the Baptist minister who baptised Zabeba in February 2010, wrote to Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, appealing for his intervention.[591]

# Zimbabwe

| Population | Religions | Christian Population |
|---|---|---|
| 12.5 million | Christian 71.5%<br>Local religions 26%<br>Other 2.5% | 9 million |

The re-election of President Robert Mugabe as President, in an election marred by accusations of vote-rigging, strongly suggested a continuation – if not a worsening – of the intolerance and desperate poverty so many people have suffered, not least Christians.

Increasing violence and intimidation by the government – or those claiming to act on behalf of the authorities – have placed growing pressures on the lives of people already suffering from the country's economic problems. Individuals or groups who stand in opposition to brutal oppression find themselves facing the wrath of President Mugabe's regime. Bishops, priests and other senior figures have suffered as a result of their oft-stated determination to protect the rights of the marginalised and the many who live on as little as one meal every two days.

In reports received by Aid to the Church in Need covering the period up to January 2012, senior Catholic clergy described arrests and threats of violence against clergy, religious Sisters and others. They spoke of how churches and other church buildings seized. One bishop said: "In some parts of Zimbabwe we see now the beginnings of a real persecution of the Church, especially where Christians refuse to be co-opted by the [ruling] Zanu PF [party]". Reports state that priests are routinely subjected to arbitrary arrest and questioning.[592]

Relations between the government and the Anglican Church broke down completely when the Anglican Bishop of Harare, Nolbert Kunonga, was excommunicated by fellow bishops. With most Anglicans refusing to side with Kunonga, the regime backed the former bishop's bid to confiscate churches, schools, hospitals and bank accounts. Anglican leaders refusing to submit to Kunonga's authority reported receiving death threats, being spied on by state agents, barred from entering their churches and from burying the dead in Anglican cemeteries.[593] In one diocese, 65 churches had been confiscated and a similar number of priests had been evicted from their homes. Running battles in the courts between Kunonga and the Anglican Church over possession of property came to an end in late 2012, when the courts found in favour of the Anglican Church. In December Dr

Kunonga's spokesperson, Rev Admire Chisango, announced that the breakaway church would abide by the Supreme Court ruling and return all the property.

Reliable information about Zimbabwe is in short supply amid reports that propaganda has replaced the work of a free press following the arrest of journalists and the intimidation of others. Huge economic problems continue to blight the lives of many people, with reports of crop failure. Hyper-inflation dating back a number of years has touched the lives of almost everyone in the country, causing food and fuel shortages, mass unemployment, closure of schools and hospitals.

January 2011: Zimbabwe police stopped a retreat of 80 clergy, claiming that their prayer gathering (retreat) had not received police clearance. According to Zimbabwe's Anglican Church, forces loyal to excommunicated Bishop Kunonga descended on Peterhouse private school, east of Harare, and disrupted the retreat. The clergy, who included two bishops, denied wrongdoing and refused to leave. They dispersed after being threatened with violence. Anglican Bishop Chad Gandiya said afterwards: "We deplore this action and call upon the higher authorities to intervene. So much for freedom of religion."[594]

April 2011: Police attacked more than 500 worshippers gathered at the Church of the Nazarene in Glen Norah, Harare on 9th April 2011 for an ecumenical service. Some 20 armed riot police fired tear gas into the church before storming the building. Ironically the service commemorated the 2007 Save Zimbabwe Prayer Rally in Highfields, at which one man was shot dead and 100 people arrested following a police raid on that service. Present at the 2011 service were four senior church leaders and 36 ministers from various denominations. 14 people were arrested and taken to Harare Central Police Station, where they were charged with "causing public violence" – including Bishop Paul Isaya, aged 73, and Bishop Paul Mukome, aged 65. The two elderly clerics were reportedly among the prisoners who were beaten. Those arrested were released after two days. United Reformed Church spokesman Simon Loveitt condemned the violence: "The brutal attack… represents a new level of oppression and violence in the long litany of human rights violations by the Zimbabwe Republic Police... Even places of worship can no longer be considered as sacred or safe places – and this raises serious concerns about the fundamental human rights of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Zimbabwe."[595]

April 2011: Catholic priest Father Marko Mabutho Mkandla was arrested and charged with public order offences after holding a church service in which he prayed for the victims of an outbreak of violence in Zimbabwe in the mid-1980s. He was charged under the Public Order and Security Act for "holding a public meeting without police clearance", "communicating false statements against the state" and "causing offence to a particular tribe". The service took place in Lupane the rural district, west Zimbabwe.[596]

May/June 2011: Churchgoers, including an elderly woman, were arrested and detained and several priests turned out of their homes in Harare diocese. The escalation of attacks on the Anglican Church began on Sunday 29th May, when representatives of state-recognised Bishop Kunonga tried to take possession of two priests' houses. On the night of June 1st, another attempt was made to evict one of the ministers, Fr Julius Zimbudzana. On this occasion, members of Fr Julius's church apprehended the attacker and took him to the local police station. However, later that evening, police came to Fr Julius's house and arrested at least six people who took part in seizing the man – including Fr Julius's elderly mother. Bishop Chad Gandiya of Harare said: "Our parishioners are greatly traumatised by all this. Please continue to pray for us as a diocese."[597]

June 2011: Anglican leaders in Zimbabwe opposed to Bishop Kunonga reported receiving death threats. Bishop of Masvingo Godfrey Tawonezvi received a visit from two men who told him that Kunonga had instructed them to "eliminate" five bishops who stood in the way of his controlling the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe. "They had all our phone numbers, our home addresses," said Bishop Tawonezvi.[598]

August 2011: Parishioners were denied access to their churches and were forced to worship outside after a renegade Anglican bishop, excommunicated as a result of his support for President Mugabe's suppression of opposition, confiscated churches. A court ruling gave Bishop Nolbert Kunonga, former Bishop of Harare, permission to take over church hospitals and schools. Kunonga and his supporters have ejected bishops and officials from churches, forcing the faithful to worship outside or in private schools and. halls.[599]

October 2011: Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury, visiting Zimbabwe, handed President Mugabe a dossier listing attacks on

Christians and churches by excommunicated Bishop Kunonga of Harare, violence apparently carried out in collusion with the regime. Archbishop Williams also issued a strong criticism of the Mugabe regime and spoke out against attacks on the Church. During a homily given in an indoor sports centre in Harare, the Archbishop denounced the regime, telling the thousands present: "… their greed and violence have tried to silence your worships and frustrate your witnesses in church, schools and hospitals… The message we want to send out from this Eucharistic celebration is that we do not have to live like that in terror, in bloodshed." [600]

January 2012: A report passed to ACN from a bishop in the country described how the Catholic Church had been targeted. It read: "The Church, because it opposes the politics of violence, has become herself a victim of that political violence." The bishop, who cannot be named because of fears for his safety, went on: "All people of this country, who do not actively support the unjust policies of Zanu PF, are victims of violence, discrimination, injustice, persecution, arrests and even murder." The ACN report gave details of priests, religious and lay people threatened with violence, confiscation of church property including schools, and disruption of church activities. According to one ACN source, religious Sisters were told they would be beaten if they refused to hand over a Church-run hospital. Describing the seizure of a medical facility, the source said: "Suddenly, a group of men came in, threatening the Sisters, shouting and running around the hospital, frightening the patients. They demanded the hospital be handed over immediately."[601]

July 2012: Anglican Bishop Godfrey Tawonezwi of Masvingo was forced to move the annual event commemorating the life and ministry of missionary, activist, and poet Arthur Shearly Cripps. Police labelled the planned gathering as "illegal". Bishop Tawonezwi wrote: "This year we had arranged to hold the celebrations from 27 to 29 July but Kunonga and the police have once again stopped us from doing so. Last week Kunonga put up posters in Chivhu Town advertising that he (as the Archbishop of the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe) will be going to Shearly Cripps Shrine the same weekend we had planned to be at the shrine. The police wrote us a letter saying that all Anglican Church property is under the custodianship of Kunonga."[602]

September 2012: Police drove worshippers taking part in the Anglican diocese of Masvingo's 10th anniversary celebrations out of churches in Chivhu. Fr David Magurupira, who is following the proceedings closely, told USPG: "Kunonga came with heavily armed police and vicious dogs and drove away all Anglicans from their church buildings. They unleashed

terror like hell. People were beaten. There was chaos, with people screaming, crying for help and running in all directions."[603]

November 2012: Information received by Aid to the Church in Need described how the regime's policies have prompted ongoing emigration, leading to a severe shortage of qualified people, especially doctors and nurses. The Church report, whose authors cannot be revealed for security reasons, describes how in some areas "a good number of people survive" only because of relatives abroad who send them money. The report came at a time when Zimbabwe Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangerai is set to organise international rallies encouraging members of the diaspora to return to the country to vote in presidential elections next year.[604]

November 2012: The Supreme Court found against former Bishop Kunonga, confirming the right of the official Anglican Church of the Province of Central Africa to possess and control its property in the Diocese of Harare. The case had been ongoing for five years.

April 2013: Anglicans in Manicaland Diocese were able to return to their churches after being barred from them for the last five years following the Supreme Court ruling in favour of the Anglican Church. Over 3,000 worshippers danced and sang their way back into the Cathedral of St John the Baptist, Mutare, and St Augustine's Mission, Penhalonga, led by their Bishop Julius Makoni, who performed a cleansing ceremony at the cathedral.[605]

June 2013: For the first time since 2008, more than 20,000 Anglican pilgrims from across Africa were able to gather at the shrine of Bernard Mizeki, a 19th century African martyr, in Marondera. For the past five years state police have blocked pilgrims' access to the site. Bishop Chad Gandiya of Harare said: "This is a celebration with a difference. The last five years were very cruel because we could not come to our home [the shrine] to do what we normally do." [606]

## Notes

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Priests and parishoners after an attack on a church in Bauchi State, Nigeria

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