



Open Doors' World Watch List | January 2005

Explanation of the World Watch List

A specially-designed questionnaire is used to compile the World Watch List. The questionnaire contains 49 questions. A point value is assigned to each question, depending on how it is answered. The total number of points per country determines its position on the WWL.

The questions cover various aspects of religious freedom, differentiating between the legal, official status of Christians (eg Does the constitution and/or national laws provide for freedom of religion? Are individuals allowed by law to convert to Christianity?) and the actual situation of individual Christians (Are Christians being killed because of their faith? Are Christians being sentenced to jail, labour camp or sent to a psychiatric hospital, because of their faith?).

Attention is paid to the role of the church in society (Do Christians have the freedom to print and distribute Christian literature? Are Christian publications censored/prohibited in this country?) and to factors that may obstruct the freedom of religion in a country (Are Christian meeting-places and/or Christian homes attacked because of anti-Christian motives?).

The 'variation' column gives an indication of how certain we are about the information obtained. Sometimes information is unconfirmed or incomplete. In that case, the 'variation' will rise. Thus some countries may be ranked lower on the list because complete information is not available.

The WWL ranking

For the third year in a row, the complete lack of religious freedom in North Korea has positioned it first on the World Watch List. The strict Islamic kingdom of Saudi Arabia continues to hold the second position. Vietnam has risen one place to position three, followed by Laos in fourth place. Due to the continued pressure on believers in Iran, the country is in fifth place again this year. The Maldives remain sixth, followed by a new country in seventh place: Somalia. Christian converts from Islam are paying a high price for their new faith, especially in rural parts of this most lawless country in the world. There was no change in the status of religious freedom for Christians in Bhutan, which continues to hold position eight. In China, holding ninth place, the government increased control of religious activities during 2004. The top ten is concluded by a new number ten: Afghanistan, where the status of religious freedom deteriorated mostly because of the influence of Islamic extremists.

Islam is the majority religion in five of the top ten countries:

- Saudi Arabia
- Iran
- Maldives
- Somalia
- Afghanistan.

Four countries have communist governments:

- North Korea
- Vietnam
- Laos
- China.

Bhutan is the only Buddhist country in the ten highest countries on the list.

Changes for the Worse

The status of religious freedom deteriorated in Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea and Ethiopia. In Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq, lawlessness and violence by Islamists caused most of the oppression of Christians, especially converts from Islam. In Somalia, three converts died as a result of physical attacks because of their new faith, and several believers had to flee. In Afghanistan, new believers from Muslim backgrounds experienced heavy pressure from Islamists. Five converts were killed for abandoning Islam and spreading Christianity. Several Christians in Iraq were faced with written threats, kidnappings, bombings and murder by Islamic extremists. Tens of thousands of Christians fled to neighbouring countries as a result. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, the new (draft) constitutions do not allow any law that is deemed to be contrary to the beliefs of Islam.

In Eritrea and Ethiopia, evangelical Christians are not officially recognised. Hundreds of Protestant Christians were imprisoned for gathering illegally in Eritrea in 2004 and were kept in deplorable conditions. Many were pressured to renounce their faith. In Ethiopia, Christians experienced the most opposition from local authorities and radical Muslims in majority Islamic areas. A number of believers were imprisoned or have remained in hiding throughout the year.

Changes for the Better

The situation of Christians improved to varying extents in Sudan, Colombia, Myanmar, Algeria, Turkey and Qatar.

After two decades of civil war, Christians in Sudan are encouraged by the recent peace agreements and many are hoping they will now have better access to goods and services previously denied. During 2004, there were reportedly fewer Christians killed or physically harmed. This was also the case in the conflict areas of Colombia, which explains the decrease in rank for this country. However, religious freedom did not change significantly in the Latin American nation, where Christians continue to be faced with kidnappings or threats of kidnappings, and displacement because of violence. Recent information on the situation of believers in Myanmar shows that persecution is less serious than last year, although Christians still face church closures, difficulties in registration and a ban on church construction. A slight improvement in religious freedom is taking place in Algeria. Algerians are becoming adjusted to the presence of Christians, and the government generally does not interfere with church activities. Converts from Muslim backgrounds are still facing strong social pressure. In Turkey, legalisation for religious freedom was adapted somewhat to European standards and some Christians enjoyed better treatment by authorities. Nonetheless, the improvement is not really accepted in most formal laws or in the minds of the Turkish majority. Qatar saw the launch of its first constitution, and it guaranteed freedom of religion. Five Christian communities received permission to start building five new churches, the first in the Gulf state since the seventh century.

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■ Severe persecution ■ Oppression ■ Severe limitations ■ Some limitations □ Some problems

Country Name	January 2005	January 2004	Trend	Variation
1. Korea, North	82,0	82,5	0	7,0
2. Saudi Arabia	68,5	70,5	0	0,0
3. Vietnam	65,0	63,0	0	0,0
4. Laos	63,5	65,5	0	0,0
5. Iran	63,5	63,0	0	8,0
6. Maldives	60,5	60,5	0	7,5
7. Somalia	60,0	57,0	-	5,5
8. Bhutan	59,5	59,5	0	7,0
9. China	58,0	57,5	0	0,0
10. Afghanistan	58,0	55,5	-	4,0
11. Yemen	57,5	55,5	0	4,0
12. Turkmenistan	56,0	58,5	0	2,0
13. Pakistan	50,5	52,0	0	0,0
14. Comoros	49,5	50,5	0	2,0
15. Uzbekistan	49,0	49,0	0	2,0
16. Eritrea	48,5	44,5	-	5,0
17. Myanmar (Burma)	48,0	53,5	+	0,0
18. Egypt	44,5	46,0	0	0,0
19. Sudan	43,5	47,0	+	0,0
20. Libya	42,5	43,0	0	7,5
21. Iraq	42,0	35,5	-	2,0
22. Azerbaijan	41,5	43,0	0	0,0
23. Morocco	41,5	42,5	0	1,5
24. Brunei	40,5	40,5	0	6,5
25. Nigeria (North)	40,5	38,5	0	0,0
26. Cuba	39,0	41,0	0	0,0
27. Russian Federation (Muslim) ¹	37,5	37,5	0	5,0
28. Tajikistan	36,5	36,0	0	0,0
29. Sri Lanka	36,0	35,0	0	0,0
30. Djibouti	36,0	34,0	0	1,5
31. Mexico (South) ²	34,5	36,5	0	0,0
32. Tunisia	34,5	32,5	0	5,0
33. Qatar	33,5	39,0	+	1,5
34. India	33,5	35,5	0	0,0
35. Nepal	31,5	33,5	0	4,0
36. Colombia (Conflict Areas) ³	31,0	38,5	+	0,0
37. Indonesia	31,0	31,5	0	3,5
38. Algeria	30,5	33,5	+	4,5
39. Turkey	29,0	32,0	+	0,0
40. Mauritania	28,5	30,5	0	5,0
41. Kuwait	27,0	26,5	0	5,0
42. Belarus	26,0	26,0	0	1,5
43. United Arab Emirates	25,0	27,0	0	4,5
44. Oman	25,0	27,0	0	5,0
45. Syria	24,5	25,0	0	2,0
46. Bangladesh	24,0	25,5	0	0,0
47. Jordan	24,0	25,5	0	0,0
48. Kenya (North East)	23,5	21,5	0	0,0
49. Ethiopia	23,5	21,0	-	0,0
50. Bahrain	20,5	22,5	0	6,5

¹ Muslim republics of the Russian Federation: Chechnya, Kabardino Balkarya, Dagestan and Tatarstan

² Southern Mexican state of Chiapas

Focus on the Top Ten

1. North Korea ►

The Stalinist country of North Korea is characterised by a complete lack of religious freedom and of many other human rights. For the third year in a row, North Korea heads the ranking as the worst violator of religious rights. Christianity is perceived as one of the greatest threats to the regime's power. The government will arrest not only the suspected dissident but also three generations of his family in order to root out the 'bad influence'. At least 20 Christians were arrested for their faith in 2004. It is believed that tens of thousands of Christians are currently suffering in North Korean prison camps, where they are faced with cruel abuses. North Korea is suspected of detaining more political and religious prisoners than any other country in the world. Though no exact figures can be given, our staff discovered that more than 20 Christians were killed by open-air shootings or by beatings in the prison camps during the past year.

2. Saudi Arabia ►

Also this year, Saudi Arabia is high in the top ten of the World Watch List. Religious freedom does not exist in the Wahhabist kingdom. Its citizens are not allowed to adhere to any other religion than Islam. The legal system is based on Islamic law (sharia). Apostasy – conversion to another religion – is punishable by death. Christians and other non-Muslims are prohibited from gathering for public worship. Christians spreading their religion are likely to be imprisoned, as was Indian citizen Brian O'Connor who was sentenced to 10 months imprisonment and 300 lashes during the past year. Whilst in prison, he discovered other Christians in prison for their faith in Saudi Arabia. O'Connor was physically mistreated and pressed to convert to Islam, then released unconditionally from prison after seven months and deported.

3. Vietnam ▲

New to third place is Vietnam, rising one position. One of the few communist nations in the world, Vietnam considers Christians to be a hidden enemy. Authorities fear that Evangelical Christianity, suspected to be connected to the United States, is being used in a peaceful revolution against the communist system. Although the constitution provides for religious freedom, the government considerably restricts unrecognised religious activities. A new law on religion was introduced during the past year and bans any religious activity deemed to threaten national security, public order or national unity. The new ordinance was also used to prohibit unregistered church services in private houses. More than 100 Christians – mainly from a tribal background – were imprisoned. Many were forced to renounce their faith. During Easter, hundreds of ethnic minority Montagnards were arrested or injured and an unknown number killed in demonstrations against religious oppression and confiscation of tribal lands in Dak Lak province. Though the demonstrations resulted from a larger Montagnard issue and cannot be attributed solely to Christian repression, they probably brought additional repression to minority Christians.

4. Laos ▼

Laos' constitution provides for religious freedom in this South East Asian country. However, the absence of rule of law and specific regulation on religious matters allows local officials to interpret and implement the constitutional provisions as they choose. Article 9, for instance, discourages all acts that create divisions among religions and persons, and officials use it to prohibit evangelising and to discourage religious conversions. Decree 92 on religious practice requires that almost all aspects of religious practice be approved by the authorities. During the past few years, religious conditions have improved slightly for Protestant Christians, although intolerance continued in some areas. Several Christians were arrested and accused of engaging in illegal church activities outside of their church premises because they didn't have an official permit to travel outside their villages. They were also accused of speaking negatively about the government. Some local officers have threatened to kill believers if they do not renounce their faith.

5. Iran ►

Islam is the official religion in Iran, and all laws and regulations must be consistent with the official interpretation of *sharia* law. Because conservative parties were victorious in the elections (at the beginning of 2004), religious freedom further deteriorated. Although Christians belong to one of the recognised religious minorities who are guaranteed religious freedom, they have reported imprisonment, harassment and discrimination because of

their faith. Iranian authorities have banned the Bible and closed down Protestant churches that accept worshippers from an Islamic background. Hundreds of Christian converts were arrested throughout the year. Iranian Christians considered the detention of 85 Christian pastors in September to be the biggest crisis in 10 years. Most of the prisoners have been released, but many reported they received severe beatings and threats in jail. A former army colonel was sentenced to three years in prison for hiding his Christian faith, despite documented proof that the army knew he had become a Christian before he was ever given officer rank. There is a risk that he will be charged before a sharia court. In sharia legislation, apostasy is punishable by death.

6. Maldives ▲

In the archipelago of the Maldives, Islam is the official state religion and all citizens must be Muslims. Sharia law is observed, which prohibits the conversion from Islam to another religion. A convert could lose citizenship as a result. It is illegal to practise any religion other than Islam, which is considered to be an important tool in stimulating national unity and maintenance of the government's power. Hence it is impossible to open any churches, though foreigners are allowed to practise their religion in private so long as they don't encourage Maldivians to participate. The Bible and other Christian materials cannot be imported, apart from a copy for personal use. In the country – one of the least evangelised on earth – there are only a handful indigenous believers, and they are forced to live their faith in complete secrecy. The lack of respect for religious freedom in the Maldives remained the same during 2004.

7. Somalia ▲

The East African country of Somalia is new in the top ten. Less than one per cent of ethnic Somalis are Christian, practising their faith in secret. Having no central government, the country lacks a constitution or other national laws to protect religious freedom. Islam is the official religion and social pressure is strong to respect Islamic tradition, especially in certain rural parts of the country. Somali Christians indicated that they face heavy pressure to join Islam. During 2004, several Christian converts from Islam reported physical assaults due to their new faith, and some had to escape to other villages. In those regions, even the possession of a Bible can lead to a dangerous situation. Three converts were killed by fundamentalist Muslims because of their beliefs. There is a saying that a Christian Somali is a dead Somali – when discovered, they risk immediate death.

8. Bhutan ►

Mahayana Buddhism is the state religion in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. Officially, the Christian faith does not exist and Christians are not allowed to pray or celebrate in public. Priests are denied visas to enter the country. Christians are being deprived of their rights, such as children's education, government jobs and setting up private businesses. Society exerts strong pressure to comply with Buddhist norms. During Easter, three house churches were raided by the police. The church members were warned not to gather for worship and told that the government considered their meetings to be terrorist activities. The import of printed religious matter is restricted, and only Buddhist religious texts are allowed in the country. The lack of respect for religious freedom did not change during 2004.

9. China ▲

During 2004, China's government increased control of religious activities, further restricting them. Three internal directives were issued, aimed at the suppression of conversion of Communist Party members, the growth of religion and religious organisations across the country and the increase of religious activity on university campuses. The government wants Marxist atheism research, propaganda and education to be further strengthened. Local Christians reported intimidation, harassment and detention of believers. Several mass arrests took place in which hundreds of unregistered Christians were detained. One Christian woman was beaten to death in custody for handing out Christian tracts. However, the number of believers in both registered and unregistered churches continued to grow.

10. Afghanistan ▲

Afghanistan is back in the top ten. Religious freedom for Christians deteriorated mostly because of the influence of Islamic extremists. During 2004, five Afghan Christian converts were killed for abandoning Islam and spreading their new faith. Some parts of the country, mainly in the south and east, are still under the influence of the Taliban. Afghanistan's new provisional constitution does not provide sufficiently for religious freedom. The document stipulates that the country is an Islamic republic. Followers of other religions are free to practise their religion, provided these practices are within the limits of the law. However, "no law can be contrary to the beliefs

and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam." This clause basically gives the official and unofficial religious leaders the right to question every action that they might consider contrary to their beliefs. Blasphemy and apostasy are officially punishable by death, and Christian converts face social discrimination and threats.

Countries Where the Situation Deteriorated

Apart from Somalia and Afghanistan, the status of religious freedom deteriorated in Iraq, Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Whereas Christians enjoy more political liberties than before in Iraq, they are experiencing considerable pressure from Islamist groups. Written threats, kidnappings, bombings and murder by Muslim extremists continued to drive tens of thousands of the minority Christian population out of the country. Several churches were bombed in 2004 and many were injured or killed. In some parts of the country, Christian women are forced to cover their heads. The general insecurity allows crimes such as killings, rapes and property confiscations to remain unpunished. Religious minorities are the main victims of this lawlessness and unrest. At the beginning of 2004, the draft constitution was agreed upon. It recognises Islam as a source of legislation and specified that "no law can contradict the universally agreed tenets of Islam." The vague wording of this provision could lead to clerics holding veto power over the legislative body in determining what is Islamically correct.

The year 2004 saw a wave of arrests of evangelical believers in Eritrea. More than 400 Protestant Christians are currently imprisoned for their beliefs, a clear increase compared to the previous year. The believers suffered severe punishment and were locked in metal shipping containers. Many were put under pressure to renounce their faith. The only authorised religions recognised by the state are Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran and Islam. A new phenomenon last year was the arrest of Catholics, who are officially recognised.

Although the constitution of Ethiopia provides for freedom of religion, local Christians feel the government controls this freedom. Evangelical believers are not recognised and they report their churches are monitored. Christians experience the most opposition from local authorities and radical Muslims in majority Islamic regions. A number of believers have been imprisoned or have remained in hiding throughout the year because of their faith. Christians from an Islamic background are often fiercely persecuted by family members. Not only are they ostracised from the community, but they also face threats and attacks.

Countries Where the Situation Improved

The situation for Christians improved to different extents in Sudan, Colombia, Myanmar, Algeria, Turkey and Qatar.

After 21 years of devastating civil war, which claimed the lives of two million people, Christians in Sudan are cautiously hopeful for the new peace deal. Under the accords, the mostly Christian and animist South will remain autonomous for six years. Subsequently, there will be a referendum on independence from the largely Muslim North. Local church leaders expect the agreement will mean a lot to the Christians in Sudan. They expect to begin to enjoy access to food, water, shelter, medicines and clothing, which they were denied before. Also, as far as we could verify, fewer Christians were killed or physically harmed during 2004 than in the previous year.

Whereas the status of religious freedom did not change significantly in the conflict areas of Colombia, the ranking dropped because fewer Christians were reportedly killed or physically harmed compared to the previous year. Nevertheless, believers in rebel-occupied areas continue to live under pressure and amidst violence, partly because of their faith, although this is not easy to discern. The national army and guerrilla factions accuse believers of being allied with the rival group, although the church holds strong to its non-violent convictions. Guerrilla groups are also blaming the church for discouraging local youth from joining the insurgency. Pastors are kidnapped for money, and many live under threats of kidnapping. Evangelical families are amongst the thousands of persons displaced by fighting, and believers are killed in bomb explosions.

During 2004, we were able to collect more information on Myanmar during field trips. This information disclosed that religious freedom is less fierce than previously estimated. However, Christian believers still face church closures, major difficulties in registration, prohibition of construction of church buildings, and discrimination in the workplace.

There is an indication of slight improvement in the situation for Christians in Algeria. Threats against churches by Islamists continued, but they remained without repercussions. Algerians are reportedly getting increasingly

accustomed to the presence of Christians – even indigenous believers – and are tolerating them more and more. The indigenous church is growing, and they are able to gather openly with little interference from the authorities. Generally, the government does not interfere in the activities of non-Islamic religions. However, the law prohibits gathering to practise a faith other than Islam, and non-Islamic evangelising is illegal. Converts from Muslim backgrounds often face strong social pressure, especially from family and neighbours.

The status of religious freedom for Christians in Turkey improved to some extent. Legislation for religious freedom was somewhat accommodated to European Union laws. A Turkish pastor was acquitted of criminal charges for opening an allegedly illegal church, due to the recent reforms. At the end of the year, formal approval was granted for his church – the first new Protestant church to be built in the Turkish republic since its founding. Small Protestant congregations have often struggled against police and court harassments during the past 10 years. A Turkish TV producer was even sentenced to almost two years in jail for airing false provocations against Turkish Protestants. According to a local Christian leader, the improvement is not really defined in most formal laws or accepted in the minds of the people.

The Gulf state of Qatar enacted its first constitution in 2004, guaranteeing freedom of expression, assembly and religion. Also, five Christian communities were allowed to begin construction of new churches. The Catholic, Orthodox, Coptic, Anglican and Protestant churches will be the first Christian churches in the country since the seventh century. Before the new constitution was adopted, the Christian communities in the country were illegal but tolerated.