

## For Your Information

12/26/2012| By [Katrina Lantos Swett](#)

The following [Washington Post On Faith](#) opinion was published on December 24, 2012.

In a poem that became one of America's most beautiful Christmas carols, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote, "I heard the bells on Christmas day, their old familiar carols play, and wild and sweet the words repeat, of peace on earth, good will to men."

This promise of the season remains the most elusive.

Indeed, while America's Christians look joyfully ahead to celebrating Christ's birth, their brothers and sisters in too many other countries must approach this season fearing for their safety and freedom. Given the grim recent history, their worries are not unfounded.

[Five died in a church attack](#) on Christmas in Nigeria. Last year, also on Christmas Day, bombs exploded in Nigeria in or around churches in Jos, Kano, Madalla, Gadaka, and Damaturur; 40 perished in Madalla alone .

On Christmas Eve in 2010, also in Nigeria, a number of churches were attacked in Maiduguri, killing six and wounding 25.

That same year, throughout December, Iran's government ramped up its harassment of evangelicals, arresting more than one hundred by the year's end.

In early January of that year, on Coptic Christmas Eve, gunmen murdered seven Coptic churchgoers leaving a midnight mass in Naga Hammadi, Egypt.

And on the day before Christmas Eve in 2009, bombs exploded in Iraq next to the Syriac Orthodox Church of St. Thomas and the Chaldean Church of St. George in Mosul, leaving several dead.

These are some of the many examples of what Christians endure for their faith -- not only during Christmas time, but throughout the year. In clear violation of international standards contained in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and as documented by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), governments across the globe perpetrate or tolerate egregious violations of Christians' fundamental right to practice their faith peacefully.

Iran's government remains a serious perpetrator. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has called for an end to Christianity's development in the country. Christians are subject to harassment, arrests, intense surveillance, imprisonment, and possible death.

Similarly, the government of China persecutes Christian groups, from Catholics to the house church movement, that refuse to "register" with the authorities, as well as Christian lawyers who defend these and other religious organizations or movements. Members face severe sanctions, including fines, property confiscations, imprisonment, and torture, as well as government control over the selection of religious leaders.

And the government of Pakistan, through its blasphemy code and other restrictions, has created a climate conducive to violence against Christians, as was horrifyingly evident with the assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti, the highest-ranking Christian in Pakistan's government, earlier last year.

In Nigeria, the government's sins of omission are the problem. Its failure to contain sectarian tensions between Muslims and Christians has created an atmosphere of impunity leading to the rise of Boko Haram, a Muslim extremist movement responsible for much of the worst violence against Christians. In Iraq, a similar failure led to years of Christians being kidnapped, raped, tortured, bombed, and beheaded. The result has been mass emigration, jeopardizing the survival of one of the world's oldest Christian communities.

Christian communities that are nearly as old as Iraq's face similar threats. Egypt's Coptic community faces escalating violence and continued discrimination on account of their faith, as during the Mubarak era.

It's no coincidence that where Christians are persecuted, so are members of other religious groups. From secular dictatorships and religious theocracies to violent religious extremist groups, the same tyrannical forces that assault the right of Christians to practice their faith freely do likewise to others.

It's a cruel irony that those who embrace the Christmas message of a child born to bring peace on earth while offering reconciliation to God should face continued hatred, violence, and oppression.

As Longfellow wrote, "Hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men."

And yet he went on to say, "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: 'God is not dead, nor doth he sleep. The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, good will to men.'"

To honor this hope, we must stand firmly with the persecuted -- Christians and people of all beliefs -- and reaffirm their right to live out their beliefs in liberty and peace.

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