

INTRODUCTION

By any measure, religious freedom abroad has been under serious and sustained assault since the release of our commission's last Annual Report in 2015. From the plight of new and longstanding prisoners of conscience, to the dramatic rise in the numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons, to the continued acts of bigotry against Jews and Muslims in Europe, and to the other abuses detailed in this report, there was no shortage of attendant suffering worldwide.

The incarceration of prisoners of conscience – people whom governments hold for reasons including those related to religion – remains astonishingly widespread, occurring in country after country, and underscores the impact of the laws and policies that led to their imprisonment.

In China, Pastor Bao Guohua and his wife, Xing Wenxiang, were sentenced in Zhejiang Province in February 2016 to 14 and 12 years in prison, respectively, for leading a Christian congregation that was opposing a government campaign to remove crosses atop churches. They join many other prisoners of conscience, including Ilham Tohti, a respected Uighur Muslim scholar, who was given a life sentence in September 2014 for alleged separatism.

Over the past year, the Chinese government has stepped up its persecution of religious groups deemed a threat to the state's supremacy and maintenance of a "socialist society." Christian communities have borne a significant brunt of the oppression, with numerous churches bulldozed and crosses torn down. Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists continue to be repressed, and the Chinese government has asserted its own authority to select the next Dalai Lama. Falun Gong practitioners often are held in "black jails" and brainwashing centers, with credible reports of torture, sexual violence, psychiatric experimentation, and organ harvesting.

In Eritrea, where 1,200 to 3,000 people are imprisoned on religious grounds, there reportedly were new arrests this past year. Religious prisoners routinely are

sent to the harshest prisons and receive the cruelest punishments. In 2006, the government deposed Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Antonios, who protested government interference in his church's affairs. Besides being stripped of his church position, he has been held incommunicado since 2007 and reportedly denied medical care.

Eritrea's dictatorship controls the internal affairs of the state-registered Orthodox Christian and Muslim communities and also bans public activities of non-registered groups. Religious freedom conditions are grave especially for Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses.

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In Iran, Shahram Ahadi, a Sunni cleric, was sentenced in October 2015 to death on unfounded security-related charges. Iran holds many other prisoners of conscience including the Baha'i Seven who were given 20-year sentences in 2010 for their leadership roles in the persecuted Baha'i community. They are: Afif Naeimi, Behrouz Tavakkoli, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Vahid Tizfahm, Fariba Kamalabadi, Mahvash Sabet, and Saeid Rezaie.

Elevating its own interpretation of Shi'a Islam above all others, Iran subjects its people – from Shi'a, Sunni, and Sufi Muslim dissenters to Baha'is and Christian converts – to increasing religious freedom abuses, from harassment to arrests and imprisonment. Some have been sentenced to death for "enmity against God." Since President Hasan Rouhani took office in 2013, the number of individuals from religious minority communities imprisoned due to their beliefs has increased.

In North Korea, thousands of religious believers and their families are imprisoned in labor camps, including those forcibly repatriated from China. Because North Korea is such a closed society, it is hard even to know the names of religious prisoners. The government controls all political and religious expression and activities and punishes those who question the regime. Religious freedom is non-existent. Individuals secretly engaging in religious activities are subject to arrest, torture, imprisonment, and execution. North Koreans suspected of contacts with South Koreans or foreign missionaries or who are caught possessing Bibles have been executed.

laws emboldens the Pakistani Taliban and individual vigilantes, triggering horrific violence against religious communities and individuals perceived as transgressors, most recently Christians and Muslim bystanders on Easter Sunday 2016 in Lahore.

In Saudi Arabia, Ashraf Fayadh, a Saudi poet and artist, was sentenced to death in November 2015 for apostasy, allegedly for spreading atheism. His sentence was changed in February 2016 to eight years in prison and 800 lashes. Raif Badawi, founder and editor of the “Free Saudi Liberals” web site, has been imprisoned since 2012 on charges that include “insulting Islam.” In 2014, an appeals court increased his original sentence

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In Pakistan, Abul Shakoor was sentenced on January 2, 2016 to five years in prison on blasphemy charges and three years on terrorism charges for propagating the Ahmadiyya Muslim faith. Another Pakistani, Aasia Bibi, a Catholic mother of five, has been imprisoned since her arrest in 2009 on blasphemy charges. She remains on death row.



“Family members mourn the death of a relative, who was killed in a blast that happened outside a public park, in Lahore, Pakistan” –Reuters

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of seven years in prison and 600 lashes to 10 years in jail and 1,000 lashes.

Imposing its own interpretation of Sunni Islam on the country, Saudi Arabia bans all non-Muslim public worship and continues to prosecute and imprison individuals for dissent, apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery. During the past year, the Saudi government continued to repress dissident clerics and members of the Shi’a community.

In Sudan, the government prosecuted 25 Quranists for apostasy and stiffened penalties for both apostasy and blasphemy. The regime prosecutes Christian pastors on trumped-up charges and represses and marginalizes the country’s minority Christian community. It imposes a restrictive interpretation of Shari’ah law and applies corresponding hudood punishments on Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

In Uzbekistan, Gaybullo Jalilov, a member of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, remains imprisoned for his work on behalf of persecuted independent Muslims. Jalilov is serving an 11-year sentence handed down in 2010. Uzbekistan enforces a highly restrictive religion law and imposes severe limits on all independent religious activity in this overwhelmingly Muslim-majority nation. The government imprisons as many as 12,800 Muslims. In addition, the Uzbek state often brands Evangelical Protestants and Jehovah’s



"Migrants are escorted through fields by police and the army as they are walked from the village of Rigonce to Brezice refugee camp in Rigonce, Slovenia" –Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images

Witnesses "extremists" for practicing religion outside of state-sanctioned structures. Peaceful independent Muslims are likely to be victims of torture, and the government often extends their sentences for minor violations of prison regimen just before their scheduled release date.

In Vietnam, Rev. Nguyen Trung Ton, a Protestant minister, was detained in December 2015 and joins other prisoners of conscience including Father Nguyen Van Ly, who has spent decades in prison for advocating religious freedom, democracy, and human rights.

Despite some improvements in the decades following the Vietnam War, the government still controls nearly all religious activities, restricts independent religious practice, and represses individuals and groups viewed as challenging state authority. In order to be considered legal, religious organizations and congregations must register, sometimes at multiple government levels. In 2015, Vietnam proposed a new law on religion. However, initial drafts have not revised adequately or eliminated onerous registration requirements.

In addition to the significant number of people imprisoned on the basis of religion, the horrific global refugee crisis also worsened during the past year, with religion being a factor in humanitarian crises worldwide that have forced millions to flee. According to UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, 59.5 million people worldwide were displaced forcibly as of the end of 2014, the highest on record, and this number likely exceeded 60 million in 2015.



"A Rohingya child who recently arrived by boat has his picture taken for identification purposes at a shelter in Kuala Langsa, in Indonesia's Aceh Province" –Reuters

Among the displaced were thousands of Rohingya Muslims forced to flee their homes in Burma, joining other Rohingya already displaced internally. While last year's general elections marked the country's bid to emerge from its past as a military dictatorship, the government enacted four discriminatory "race-and-religion" bills that not only effectively disenfranchised as many as one million Rohingya, but also denied them the right to contest the elections. These measures reflect a legacy of their brutal persecution by both government and society, which contributed to the refugee crisis. Meanwhile, military incursions in Kachin and Shan states continued to displace and terrorize thousands, including their Christian residents.

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Seeking refuge from a dictatorial government, Eritreans also have fled by the thousands each month, with an estimated half a million escaping one of the world's most closed nations.

Adding disproportionately to the ranks of the displaced were millions from Iraq and Syria, including

Yazidis, Christians, Shi'a Muslims, and Sunni Muslims who do not subscribe to the barbaric interpretation of Islam of the terrorist group ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, also often referred to as IS, ISIS, or Da'esh). ISIL's summary executions, rape, sexual enslavement, abduction of children, destruction of houses of worship, and forced conversions all are part of what our commission has seen as a genocidal effort to erase their presence from these countries. In March of this year, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry rightly proclaimed ISIL a perpetrator of genocide, which USCIRF had recommended publicly in December.

The governments of Syria and Iraq can be characterized by their near-incapacity to protect segments of their population from ISIL and other non-state actors, as well as their complicity in fueling the sectarian tensions that have made their nations so vulnerable. Syria's government has not only fueled these tensions but committed crimes against humanity in its treatment of Sunni Muslims.

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Conditions in Nigeria have contributed to the crisis there. Boko Haram continues to attack with impunity both Christians and many Muslims. From bombings at churches and mosques to mass kidnappings of children from schools, Boko Haram has cut a wide path of terror across vast swaths of Nigeria and in neighboring countries, leaving thousands killed and millions displaced.

In Central African Republic, a 2013 coup helped create the conditions for sectarian fighting between Christians and Muslims in which civilians were targeted based on their religious identity. As a result, 80 percent of CAR's Muslim population has fled to neighboring countries, and 417 of the country's 436 mosques were destroyed. Sectarian and retaliatory violence continued



"Local people carry a dead body during the funeral ceremony for 5 Muslims killed by Christian anti-balaka militiamen in the capital Bangui, Central African Republic" –Thierry Bresillon/ Anadolu Agency

in 2015, with the most serious resulting in 77 dead and 40,000 displaced.

Where did all these people go? While many were displaced to neighboring countries, a record number of refugees and migrants, more than one million, attempted in 2015 the perilous Mediterranean crossing or sought other avenues to apply for asylum in an unprepared Europe.

This mass influx fueled an already-rising tide of hatred and violence targeting Muslims and Jews, particularly in Western Europe.

Anti-Muslim activity, from verbal harassment to vandalism to violent assaults, increased in multiple Western European nations as xenophobic nationalist political parties and groups, including neo-Nazis, stirred up hatred against the newcomers and older immigrants.



"A member of the Muslim community touches burnt books in Saint Priest, near Lyon, a day after a fire damaged a mosque in an attack that the French interior ministry in Paris said was arson" –Philippe Merle/AFP/Getty Images



"A member of the Jewish community is seen at a cemetery near the town of Colmar, close to the German border, after more than 100 graves were daubed with anti-Semitic slogans"
– Reuters

Jews increasingly were targeted in similar ways by these same parties and groups, and also by Islamist extremists who in turn sought recruits from disaffected members of Muslim communities. The January 2015 terrorist attack on the Hyper Cacher kosher supermarket in Paris—along with attacks on a Jewish museum in Brussels in 2014 and a synagogue in Copenhagen last year—were among the horrific results. Despite the increasing police protection in places where European Jews congregate, the rise in anti-Semitism has produced an exponential rise in Jewish emigration from Europe, with immigration to Israel from France increasing from less than 2,000 in 2012 to nearly 8,000 last year alone.

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These and other terrorist attacks also have produced backlashes against Muslims by members of the wider society, in which Muslims often are blamed collectively. Mosques have been given police protection in several countries, and European Union officials have stressed the importance of not stigmatizing all Muslims.

The incarceration of prisoners of conscience, the increase in the number of refugees, and the spread of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim actions across Europe are crises in their own right which cry out for continued action on the part of the international community,

including the United States. To be effective, such action must recognize the unmistakable fact that religious freedom is a common thread in each of these challenges, and deserves a seat at the table when nations discuss humanitarian, security, and other pressing issues. The United States and other countries must fully accord this right the respect it deserves and redouble their efforts to defend this pivotal liberty worldwide.