

2016 World Watch List drawn from world headlines



Some of the most urgent headlines of the past 12 months, from the global spread of jihadist violence to North Korea's test of a putative atomic weapon, intersect with an [updated list of the most difficult places to live as a Christian](#).

For the 14th straight year, North Korea is the most difficult place to be a Christian, according to the 2016 Open Doors World Watch List, released 13 Jan. by Open Doors, a charity that provides support to Christians who live under pressure because of their faith. North Korea's 'dictatorial paranoia' has kept it at the head of the 50 countries on the annual list, a placement underscored 6 Jan. when the country detonated what it claims to be a hydrogen bomb.

But the gap between North Korea and the rest of the world is narrowing, Open Doors said.

Throughout the 49 other countries on the list, the dominant and growing source of pressure on Christians is 'Islamic extremism.' It is the primary driver of persecution in the rest of the top 10 countries on the list, and in 36 of the entire list of 50 countries. Many of those countries share a common denominator in the 2016 list: the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

'Islamic State and its affiliates took their barbarity across borders like never before: into Libya, Kenya, and Egypt, culminating in random massacres in Paris on 13 November and in San Bernardino in the US on 2 December 2015,' wrote Open Doors Director of Strategic Trends Ron Boyd-MacMillan in an analysis accompanying the Open Doors World Watch List. 'There is a feeling globally that no one is safe from the reach of these newer jihadists, who can recruit, convert and train any one through the internet.'

Niger returned to the list, at No. 49. Early in 2015, following the IS-inspired attacks in Paris against the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, the former French colony suffered attacks by Islamists who destroyed almost all its 70 churches and killed 10 people. Plus, sharing a long border with Nigeria has meant an occasional overspill of violence from the Boko Haram jihadist insurgency.

In the 12 months ending 31 Oct. 2015 'the period measured by the current Open Doors World Watch List' Islamic State spread its influence in places it does not appear to have a presence. Sympathizers in other countries such as Nigeria and Libya have aligned themselves to IS after carrying out atrocities among their own minority Christian populations.

Open Doors also said, for example, that the government of the Kurdish region of northern Iraq 'is ordering land to be sold to Muslim families in several predominantly Christian areas and towns.' The region has been a comparative safe haven for thousands of Christian refugees fleeing IS from Mosul and the Nineveh Plain.

Worries about expanding Islamic extremism have prompted governments to clamp down on what they see as 'extremism?', squeezing Christians along with everyone else. Central Asian governments have expanded surveillance of church activities, Boyd-MacMillan said, a move that typified what he characterized as 'the year of fear.'

The impact could be seen in the results of the annual survey of Christian-life conditions that Open Doors conducts to determine its rankings. The numerical scores assigned to each country rose across the board; the 50th country on the 2013 list registered 35 points; No. 50 on this year's 2016 list registered 53 points, a rise of almost 50 per cent over three years.

Pressure on Christians continues to rise in Africa, a trend that emerged in 2012 as the Arab Spring spread across the Arab world, and which looks set to continue. Sixteen of the 50 countries on the Open Doors World Watch List are African, a number greater than the 14 countries from the Middle East and Persian Gulf. When the list is expanded to 65 countries, a further nine African nations are added.

Islamic extremism in the world today has two hubs, one in the Middle East, the other in sub-Saharan Africa, Boyd-MacMillan said. In numerical terms at least, though not in degree, the persecution of Christians in this region dwarfs what is happening in the Middle East.

For the first time, India is among the list's top 20, ranking No. 17. The world's biggest democracy, governed by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, is at the front of a surge of militant Hindu pressure on religious minorities, most frequently Muslims and Christians.

Christian communities, across many denominations, report an increase of harassment and violence in the last year, including physical violence, arson, desecration of churches and Bibles, and disruption of religious services, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said about India in its 2015 annual report. Reportedly, local police seldom provide protection, refuse to accept complaints, rarely investigate, and in a few cases encourage Christians to move or hide their religion.

Source: The World Watch Monitor