

OPEN DOORS' WORLD WATCH LIST 2006

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 depending on how each question 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 to convert to Christianity by law?*) 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

The complete lack of religious freedom has brought **North Korea** again – for the fourth year in a row – to the first position on the World Watch List. The strict Islamic kingdom of **Saudi Arabia** continues to hold the second position. **Iran** is new on place three, followed by a new number four as well, **Somalia**. Both countries were in the top ten last year, but rose a few positions. Though the total of points for the **Maldives** remained the same, the changes and moves in the scores for other countries in the top ten made the archipelago rise one place. **Bhutan** moved from eight to six, mostly under the influence of other countries but to some extent also due to a slight rise in points. On eight we find a new country in the top ten: **Yemen**. We received new information on the country, especially on the situation of Christians from a Muslim background, which led to an increase in points. There were some improvements in the situation of Christians in **Vietnam** and **Laos**, which made both countries fall a few positions in the top ten: respectively from number three and four to number seven and nine. There was no major change in religious freedom for Christians in **China** and as such, the country continues to have the same total of points, though it fell one position from number 9 to 10 under influence of the situation in other countries. Due to less reported violence against Christians in **Afghanistan** in 2005 than in the previous year, the country moved from the top ten, to position number 11.

Islam is the religion of the majority in five of the top ten countries: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Somalia, Maldives and Yemen. Four countries have communist governments: North Korea, Vietnam, Laos and 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 **Iran, Uzbekistan, India** and **Bangladesh**.

A new wave of persecution of Christians started in **Iran** after the election of hard-line conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Since 2005's election, many Christians – mainly those of Islamic background – have not only been rounded up for harassment, but many have been arrested and beaten. In **Uzbekistan**, government measures following the suppression of the popular uprising in Andijan led to restrictions in religious freedom for Christians. The level of monitoring of churches and Christians has increased considerably. Violence against Christians in **India** seems to be on the rise. Christians are coming under increased pressure (in the form of physical attacks, killings, depiction in the media, threats etc.) because of accusations of (alleged) outreach activities. Intolerance and atrocities against minorities are increasing in **Bangladesh**. A radicalisation is evident amongst Muslims in the country, where several Christians were murdered in connection with their faith in 2005.

Changes for the Better

The situation of Christians improved to different extents in **Vietnam, Laos, Afghanistan, Sudan, Nigeria, Colombia** and **Mexico**.

Church leaders in **Vietnam** and **Laos** indicated that the situation for Christians had improved to some extent in 2005. Christians were allowed to build and renovate church buildings and conduct training. In Laos, Christian leaders in the south were able to undertake many church activities with little or no government interference. What particularly has changed is the increasing ability of church leaders or individual Christians to bring cases of persecution and abuse by local government leaders to the respective national offices. However, the main group of Christians in the north continues to face difficulties and persecution.

In 2004, five Afghan Christian converts were killed in **Afghanistan** for abandoning Islam and spreading their new faith. We did not receive similar reports for 2005, which explains why Afghanistan has lost a few points. However, violence in general continues to occur frequently, as Muslim fundamentalist resistance is still active. Last year, we reported on the new hope Christians in **Sudan** cherished with the signing of the peace deal, which ended more than 20 years of civil war. Already in 2004 there were less incidents of violence against Christians compared to earlier years. In 2005 this trend seemed to continue, with no confirmed reports of Christians being killed for their faith and fewer other incidents reported, such as physical assaults and kidnappings. We continued to receive reports of religious violence in **Nigeria** in 2005. However, the violence led to fewer casualties among Christians than in 2004. Nigeria continues to be a country to observe closely, especially since plans of Muslim militants were uncovered to attack Christians in certain states and destabilize the states involved.

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 arrested 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. With regards to Christian persecution in **Mexico**, we received fewer reports of physical assaults, arrests, kidnappings and killings of Christians than in earlier years. Most incidents against Christians in 2005 concern exiles and threats.

World Watch List January 2006

Country Name	January 2006	January 2005	Trend	Variation
1. Korea, North	82.0	82.0	0	7.0
2. Saudi Arabia	68.0	68.5	0	0.0
3. Iran	67.5	63.5	-	0.0
4. Somalia	62.0	60.0	0	2.0
5. Maldives	60.5	60.5	0	9.5
6. Bhutan	59.0	57.5	0	0.0
7. Vietnam	58.0	65.0	+	0.0
8. Yemen	58.0	57.5	0	0.0
9. Laos	56.0	63.5	+	0.0
10. China	56.0	56.0	0	0.0
11. Afghanistan	53.0	57.0	+	5.5
12. Uzbekistan	52.5	49.0	-	0.0
13. Turkmenistan	52.0	54.5	0	2.0
14. Eritrea	50.5	48.5	0	3.0
15. Comoros	47.5	49.5	0	2.0
16. Pakistan	47.0	48.5	0	0.0
17. Egypt	46.0	44.5	0	0.0
18. Myanmar (Burma)	45.0	46.0	0	0.0
19. Azerbaijan	41.5	41.5	0	0.0
20. Morocco	41.5	41.5	0	1.5
21. Brunei	41.5	40.5	0	1.5
22. Libya	41.0	42.5	0	7.5
23. Iraq	39.5	42.0	0	0.0
24. Cuba	39.0	39.0	0	0.0
25. Djibouti	36.5	36.0	0	8.0
26. India	36.0	33.5	-	0.0
27. Sudan	35.0	43.5	+	0.0
28. Nigeria (North)	34.5	40.5	+	0.0
29. Tajikistan	34.0	36.5	0	0.0
30. Sri Lanka	33.5	36.0	0	0.0
31. Russia (Muslim Rep ¹)	33.0	35.5	0	3.0
32. Tunisia	32.5	34.5	0	5.0
33. Qatar	32.0	33.5	0	3.0
34. Nepal	31.0	31.5	0	0.0
35. Indonesia	31.0	31.0	0	3.5
36. Turkey	30.5	29.0	0	0.0
37. Algeria	30.0	30.5	0	4.5
38. Ethiopia	28.5	26.0	0	5.0
39. Bangladesh	28.5	24.0	-	0.0
40. Mauritania	27.5	28.5	0	12.5
41. Kuwait	27.5	27.0	0	2.0
42. United Arab	27.5	25.0	0	0.0
43. Belarus	26.5	26.0	0	1.5
44. Colombia (Conflict Areas)	25.5	30.0	+	0.0
45. Oman	25.5	25.0	0	0.0
46. Jordan	25.5	24.0	0	0.0
47. Syria	24.5	24.5	0	0.0
48. Mexico (South ²)	22.5	29.5	+	3.5
49. Philippines (South ³)	22.0	21.5	0	0.0
50. Kenya (North East)	21.5	23.5	0	0.0

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

² Southern Mexican state of Chiapas

³ Mindanao

Focus on the Top Ten

1. North Korea ►

Violations of human rights are the order of the day in the Stalinist country of North Korea, including many breaches of religious rights. North Korea has entered its fourth year as the worst violator of religious rights for Christians. Christianity is observed as a dangerous foreign influence which stimulated the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and therefore poses one of the greatest threats to the regime's power. As a result, the North Korean authorities are making harsh efforts to root out Christianity. It is believed that tens of thousands of Christians are currently suffering in North Korean prison camps, where they face cruel abuses. The hermit regime is suspected of detaining more political and religious prisoners than any other country in the world. Several North Koreans became Christians after crossing the border with China and entering into contact with local Christians. Many among these were exposed as believers when they returned to North Korea, and they were specially targeted for arrest. Many of them were tortured and killed. Though no exact figures can be given, our staff estimates that hundreds of Christians were killed by the regime in 2005. Amidst all of this, North Korea is trying to keep up a facade of religious freedom, trying to cover the complete lack of this inalienable human right, by -- among others -- organising government-sponsored religious services in show churches in the capital of Pyongyang, which foreigners are allowed to attend.

2. Saudi Arabia ►

Also this year, Saudi Arabia remains high in the top ten of the World Watch List. Religious freedom does not exist in the Wahhabist kingdom where citizens are only allowed to adhere to one religion: Islam. No legal protection is provided for freedom of religion, neither does this protection exist in practice. The legal system is based on Islamic law (*sharia*). Apostasy -- conversion to another religion -- is punishable by death. Although the government recognizes the right of non-Muslims to worship in private, the public practice of non-Muslim worship is prohibited. However, more than 70 expatriate Christians were arrested in 2005 during worship in private homes in what has been called Saudi Arabia's largest crackdown on Christians in a decade. Most of the arrested Christians were eventually released.

3. Iran ►

Islam is the official religion in Iran, and all laws and regulations must be consistent with the official interpretation of sharia law. Whereas the deterioration of religious freedom for Christians started with the victory of conservative parties at the beginning of 2004, a new wave of persecution of Christians followed the election of a hard-line conservative president in June 2005, bringing the country to position number 3 in the World Watch List. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad hailed his election triumph as a new Islamic revolution that could spread throughout the world and pledged to restore an "Islamic government" in Iran, implying that the previous administrations were not sufficiently Islamic. Since 2005's election, many Christians have not only been rounded up for harassment, but many have been arrested and beaten. One house church pastor was killed in November. Ethnic Christians are still allowed to express their faith within their own church walls, but those who come from a Muslim background face tremendous risk because the government wants them to return to Islam. Allegedly, local authorities throughout the nation have been given the order to crack down on all Christian cell groups. Because the churches are forbidden to assist any Muslim background believers, many ethnic churches removed their support from their brothers and sisters of Muslim origin. The new policy threatens evangelism and discipleship efforts. Muslim background believer cell groups are now meeting in secret.

4. Somalia ►

In Somalia, there is no constitution or any legal provision for the protection of religious freedom. The federal government is very weak as the warlords still have some control in different parts of Somalia. Islam is the official religion and social pressure is strong to respect Islamic tradition, especially in certain rural parts of the country. Most regions make use of local forms of conflict resolution, either secular, traditional clan-based arbitration, or Islamic (sharia) law. Less than one percent of ethnic Somalis are Christian, practicing their faith in secret. In some parts of Somalia, underground believers from a Muslim background find themselves in a worse situation in 2005. Five of these believers were killed by fundamentalist Muslims. As a result, many others became afraid and fled to Kenya and other parts of the world.

5. 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 prohibited to practice any other religion than Islam, which is considered to be an important tool in stimulating national unity and maintenance of the government's power. Thus it is impossible to open any churches, though foreigners are allowed to practice their religion in private if they don't encourage citizens 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 evangelized countries on earth -- there are only a handful indigenous believers, and they live their faith in complete secrecy. The lack of respect for religious freedom in the Maldives remained the same during 2005.

6. 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. Also, the government forbids Christian house gatherings that involve several families. 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. The import of printed religious matter is restricted, and only Buddhist religious texts are allowed in the country. Society exerts strong pressure to comply with Buddhist norms. Christians are regularly arrested, as the local police often use arrests as a pressure tactic to make believers refrain from witnessing. Believers are not only experiencing pressure from the authorities but also from Buddhist clerics, sometimes experiencing physical assaults.

7. Vietnam ►

Vietnam is one of the last communist-ruled countries in the world. Although the constitution provides for religious freedom, the atheist regime tries to keep religion under strict control with a system of obligatory registrations. Many believers escape this by not registering. From time to time the Vietnamese government holds campaigns and closes churches, especially in the highlands. Vietnam drops a few places on the list, as Christians have expressed that their situation has improved in 2005, compared to previous years. In November 2004, a new ordinance was implemented in Vietnam to regulate religion. Though many feared this would lead to increasing oppression, it seems that the new ordinance has in fact resulted in slight improvements. The Evangelical Church of Vietnam was allowed to build and renovate church buildings and conduct trainings. For Roman Catholics, the situation improved dramatically: they were allowed to open a new diocese and ordain 57 new priests. Though arrests and beatings of Christians continued during 2005, they seem to take place to a lesser extent than in 2004, when more than 100 Christians were imprisoned and maltreated and an unknown number killed during Easter demonstrations against religious rights.

8. Yemen ►

The Yemeni constitution guarantees freedom of religion but it also declares that Islam is the state religion and that sharia is the source of all legislation. The Yemeni government allows expatriates some freedom to live out their faith, but Yemeni citizens are not allowed to convert. There are a handful of converts from Islamic background who face the death penalty if they are discovered. During the past year, several Christian converts were arrested and beaten for their faith. Nearly all those arrested were released after paying a fine/bribe.

9. Laos ►

Together with Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam and China, Laos is one of the remaining communist-ruled countries in the world. Laos' constitution provides for religious freedom. 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. The Laotian authorities allow limited presence of Christianity and put believers under strict surveillance. The regime limits the number of open churches and regularly closes churches, especially in the countryside. The biggest challenges to the church in Laos are societal pressure against converts who renounce evil spirit worship. But still there are many unregistered activities and the church seems to be growing despite persecution. Our staff in the region report that the situation for Christians has improved over 2005, particularly in the southern part of the country. The situation has especially improved at the grassroots level. Christian leaders in the south have expressed that they are able to undertake many church activities with no or little government interference, and training of leaders by major local leaders has increased. What particularly has changed in the last three years is the increasing ability of church leaders or individual Christians to bring cases of persecution and abuse by local government leaders to the respective national offices. When abuses were reported to the national

government, local officials were reprimanded and removed from office or transferred to other locations. However, the main group of Christians in the north continues to face difficulties and persecution. Though to a lesser extent than in previous years, Christians continued to be arrested for their faith and put under pressure to renounce their faith in 2005. Bible imports were cancelled in August as the regime stepped up monitoring the provinces that were used to transport the materials.

10. China ►

In China, the constitution provides for freedom of religious belief and the freedom not to believe. New comprehensive regulations on religious affairs passed on March 1. The most significant change is that a church can register directly under the Religious Affairs department instead of under the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). There seems to be no real change compared to the old religion law though and it appears that the government is using the new regulations to pressure unregistered house churches to register and extend control over them. During 2005, a massive crackdown took place on house churches throughout China in which thousands of Christians were arrested. Most of them were released after a few days.

Countries Where the Situation Deteriorated ►

Along with **Iran**, the status of religious freedom deteriorated in **Uzbekistan, India** and **Bangladesh**.

In **Uzbekistan**, government measures following the suppression of the popular uprising of May in Andijan had its repercussions for the religious freedom of Christians. According to our local co-workers, a wave of persecution has flooded over the country since. Whereas most incidents of persecution used to be observed in the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan, they now also occur increasingly in the remaining part of Uzbekistan. The level of monitoring churches has increased, with local authority and secret police officials visiting and inspecting churches. Several Protestant pastors have been placed under secret police surveillance and have been threatened with arrest if they do not shut down their unregistered churches. Several Christians were imprisoned during 2005, mostly because of "illegally practicing their faith" or "leading an unregistered religious community." Several churches were closed down in towns near Tashkent. Though most of the persecution comes from the government, Christians from an Islamic background in remote parts of the country also encounter resistance from fundamentalist Muslims and are put under pressure to return to their former faith. They are publicly humiliated and hounded out of their homes and jobs for converting to Christianity.

Incidents against Christians seem to be on the rise in **India**. Violence against Christians and attacks on churches increased during 2005. The central government, dominated by the moderate Congress Party, has a neutral attitude towards the church. Many state governments, however, are dominated by the BJP and related Hindu fundamentalist groups, and the central government has little to say here. At the local level, therefore, Christians are coming under increasing pressure (in the form of physical attacks, depiction in the media, threats etc.) because of accusations of (alleged) outreach activities. Hindu fundamentalists have free reign at state and local levels, and that is why various states have introduced anti-conversion legislation. During the past year, we observed the following developments in India: a campaign to provide equal rights to Christian Dalits, anti-conversion legislation drives in various states, campaigns to re-convert Christian tribals to Hinduism, physical attacks against lay Christians and clergy, threats, and several Christians were murdered. Christians were arrested in Madhya Pradesh on forced conversion charges and in Uttar Pradesh on accusations of disturbance of public peace.

Bangladesh has a rather weak government, which is coming under increasing influence of Muslim fundamentalists. Intolerance and atrocities against minorities are on the rise. Also our co-workers observe an increase in radicalization among Muslims in the country. Christians are not safe in this country, especially Muslims who convert to Christianity. In 2005, several Christians were killed by Muslim extremists. In August a series of more than 100 bomb explosions sounded the wake-up call to the government and the Christians that radical Islam is gaining more and more ground in the country. There were even reports that radical Muslims had threatened to kill all non-Islamic spiritual leaders in Bangladesh.

Countries Where the Situation Improved ►

Besides **Vietnam** and **Laos**, the situation for Christians improved to different extents in **Afghanistan, Sudan, Nigeria, Colombia and Mexico**.

During 2005 there were fewer reports of violation against Christians in **Afghanistan** than in the previous year. In 2004, five Afghan Christian converts were killed for abandoning Islam and spreading their new faith. We did not receive similar reports for 2005, which explains the fact that Afghanistan has lost a few points.

However violence in general continues to occur frequently, as Muslim fundamentalist resistance is still active. There is still much anarchy in this Islamic republic and the central government does not control the entire country. In part, Afghanistan resembles Somalia, where clans dominate the scene. Islam pervades all aspects of society and sharia law is more or less in force. Christians need to be very careful. Foreigners caught in outreach are jailed and usually deported. Converts may be punished with death – though this has not happened recently.

Last year, we reported on the new hope Christians in **Sudan** cherished, with the signing of the peace deal by the government and the SPLA rebel leaders, to end more than 20 years of civil war. In 2004, there were less incidents of violence against Christians as far as we could verify, compared to earlier years. In 2005 this trend seemed to continue, with no confirmed reports of Christians being killed for their faith and fewer incidents reported, such as physical assaults and kidnappings.

We continued to receive reports of religious violence in **Nigeria** in 2005. However, the violence led to fewer casualties among Christians than in 2004, when more than 1,500 Christians were killed and more than 173 churches destroyed. Christian and Muslim leaders blame the violence on social tensions produced by the implementation of sharia law in 12 northern states in Nigeria at the beginning of the new century. In this respect, Nigeria continues to be a country to observe closely, especially since plans of Muslim militants were uncovered to attack Christians in certain states and destabilize the states involved. The plans discovered in Kano state stated the motive to force observance of Islamic law. Groups of militants in the state have been recruited and sent to Saudi Arabia to undergo training, according to Compass Direct.

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 arrested compared to the previous year. Nevertheless, believers in rebel-occupied areas continue to live under pressure and amid 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 conviction of non-violence. 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 among the thousands of persons displaced by fighting.

Regarding Christian persecution in **Mexico**, we received fewer reports of physical assaults, arrests, kidnappings and killings of Christians than in previous years. This does not necessarily mean the situation has improved for the local Christians. We noticed last year that whereas Christian persecution in Mexico used to take place mainly in the southern state of Chiapas, incidents were now reported in the east-central state of Hidalgo and Jalisco state in the west as well. Most incidents concern exiles and threats. In the state of Chiapas, town leaders have tried to ban evangelicals also. Apparently a fierce Mexican nationalism expressing itself in anti-Americanism and anti-Protestantism, and insisting on 'traditional' cultural observance is behind the persecution of Protestants.