

Table of Contents

- ***Hate campaigns target atheists, humanists and liberals as distinct minority***
 - ***Mapping countries with religious prisoners, a report of Human Rights Without Frontiers***
 - ***How the right to deny the existence of God is under threat globally***
 - ***Freedom of religion, belief must be protected in workplace, says UN expert***
 - ***USCIRF helps launch International Parliamentary Coalition to advance religious freedom***
 - ***Religious freedom linked to economic growth, finds global study***
 - ***Naming and shaming: 8 countries egregiously violating religious freedom***
 - ***Report: State Department should double list of worst religious freedom offenders***
 - ***Religious hostilities impact more people than government restrictions on religious freedom***
 - ***Christian deaths double in 2014 World Watch List***
 - ***Vatican - Pastoral care workers killed in 2013***
 - ***8 countries on UN Human Rights Council restrict religious freedom***
-

Hate campaigns target atheists, humanists and liberals as distinct minority

This is a guest post from Bob Churchill, communications director for the International Humanist and Ethical Union.

Religion News Service (16.12.2014) - "Atheists, humanists and liberals" are now targeted as a distinct minority by "hate campaigns." This was the claim made in a [report](#), of which I was the editor, launched last week.

The charge of infidel or heretic in one form or another is logically almost as old as religion itself. Religious non-conformists and minorities, as well as the non-religious, continue to face both theological and legal prohibitions against "blasphemy" and "apostasy," as our report also covers.

But there is also something new in the world. The Freedom of Thought Report 2014 shows that there has been a shift toward the idea of atheism as a popular movement posing a "threat" to prevailing (and authoritarian) orders. It is an idea of atheists and humanists and secular liberals *as such*, somewhat divorced from the religious baggage of "apostasy," and constituting as a mass movement, a "phenomenon," as one Egyptian cleric put it this year. But not a welcome phenomenon, as examples from around the world make clear.

Saudi Arabia is no friend of human rights and prohibits apostasy with threat of the death penalty (or, more often, enforced recantation and Quranic learning). Not content with this prohibition, in January Saudi enacted a new law equating "atheism" in itself with "terrorism." This wasn't some insignificant or accidental inclusion, either. The *very first* article of the Kingdom's new "terror" regulations bans, as a terroristic threat to the state: "Calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion."

In May Malaysia's prime minister Najib Razak branded "humanism and secularism as well as liberalism" as "deviant." To Razak, this combined secular worldview is a kind of "new religion," a "human rightsism," and it's a threat to Islam and to the state.

In a more widely reported story in June, Egyptian authorities proposed an organized campaign against atheists. Nuamat Sati of the Ministry of Youth announced a program to spread awareness of "the dangers of atheism" and why it is "a threat to society," so that young atheists in particular, those who are increasingly vocal on social media, would be given "a chance to reconsider their decisions and go back to their religion." Since then, several prominent atheists – young people finding their voices on Youtube and social media – have been harassed and arrested (some of their cases feature in this report).

To some readers, this might not sound very controversial or threatening. It might not sound like "hate speech." But imagine applying these words to other descriptive or normative groups. Jews are "deviant." Muslims are a kind of "new religion," which will bring down the state. It's terrorism to "call for Christian thought in any form." We must spread awareness of "the dangers of the green movement" or "of racial impurity" or "of sexual minorities." We must reeducate youth to explain that these *Others* are a "threat to society." Such language is all too familiar and goes far beyond merely dissenting or disagreeing with a point of view. It is, as we would readily recognize with such other groups, language that is antagonistic, alienating and intolerant, and the stuff of which mass hatred and tragedy is made.

This trend — toward targeting "atheists" and "humanists" and "secularists" and even the much broader "liberals" in those terms — risks widening the range of targets for hatred and exclusion. As we write in the report: "A blasphemy accusation in Pakistan, for example, can hang on a very thin wisp of rumour. As new terms are introduced – new names to call people, new stereotypes to look out for, new modes of speech to latch onto, or indeed, new lines of *false* accusation to plot – the scope for bigotry and persecution increases."

There are three important things that in my view must now happen:

1) The international community must accept the unitary and inclusive nature of [Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), which guarantees the "right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion." The theist's right to theism is *the very same right* as the atheist's right to atheism and always has been. As a moral right it derives from the shared human nature of our minds; as a legal convention it is written right there in the international framework. The illiberal notion, floated all too often, that one country as a whole has a religious culture and that therefore the state itself should be permitted to ban non-belief is like saying that one country as a whole watches TV so *you* must do so, too. The state doesn't get to engineer such things. We all have a right to watch or *not* to watch TV, even to criticise some of the programmes other people watch, and most importantly to invent our own ways of amusing ourselves instead.

2) Those who really don't like atheism must accept that it isn't going to go away. In fact it's growing. Atheists are particularly hard to count, in part for some of the very reasons covered in our report and discussed in this article: it is made incredibly hard to "come

out" if the threat of social stigma or even criminal charges pervades the culture. Studies therefore vary widely in their estimates of irreligiosity, but the vast majority of research does show that we are a real and growing global minority. As access to comparative religious and wider philosophical ideas becomes available through our globalising culture, the old geo-religious blocs are breaking down, and atheism is sprouting up in the cracks. Maybe you don't like that, maybe you think it's a cultural tragedy, but it really doesn't matter, because the idea is out there. Anti-terror laws, "re-education" campaigns and vigilante anti-blasphemy mobs may hurt us, but they will not stop the idea from spreading.

3) Atheists and humanists themselves should not be afraid of recognising that, on the global scale, we are a persecuted minority. This language does not come easily! There are several barriers: For some of us (for perfectly understandable reasons) the barrier is resistance to "playing the victim card;" For some of us, maybe it is pride; For others, it may just *sound* ridiculous, because it's such an unreality in our own lives in relatively comfortable, secular, liberal countries; For still other atheists, perhaps, maybe the very idea of being a *group* is antithetical to our way of thinking. If we weren't raised atheists, if we came to it ourselves, as *individuals*, and maybe we left religion in part because of what we saw as the perils of groupthink, we're damned if we're going to be part of a group again now! The point is, atheists, humanists and secular liberals are rarely the first to naturally self-identify as a group (and there are lots of good reasons for that). Nevertheless, if we *are* a group, both in the eyes of the intolerant, and because in fact there is a social movement afoot, then we must recognise this, even embrace it. For some of us, we must relearn our natural rejection of being lumped together. At least we must show solidarity to the people living in parts of the world where voicing atheism or advocating humanism or even lobbying for secularism or liberalism can put you in exile, in jail, on a psychiatric ward, or in the grave.

This trend toward identifying atheists as a target minority is obviously negative, but it may also reflect a positive movement. In recognising atheism and humanism as cohesive worldviews, secular and naturalistic but not reducible to a stance on any one religion or authority, the haters may inadvertently be familiarising their societies to the very ideas they are trying to resist. If 2014 has seen something of a surge in hate directed at atheists, it is at least a backlash against a steadily globalising conception of non-religious identities. Those of us with a secular worldview are recognising ourselves more, stumbling upon new terms and new arguments through international media and the internet, coming together online, talking, in some countries meeting in secret. The non-religious are raising their heads above the parapet. There is a backlash, but it's a backlash that is a response to a surge of new ideas and new connections, and we can hold onto that.

Bob Churchill is communications director at the International Humanist and Ethical Union. The full Freedom of Thought Report is available [here](#).

- See more at: <http://brianpellot.religionnews.com/2014/12/16/hate-campaigns-target-atheists-humanists-liberals-distinct-minority/#sthash.f6QgFVnV.dpuf>

Mapping countries with religious prisoners, a report of Human Rights Without Frontiers

**North Korea, China and Iran top three countries massively arresting and
imprisoning believers**

Press Release, Monday 29 December 2014

HRWF Int'l (29.12.2014) - In 2014, three countries – **North Korea, China** and **Iran** – have imprisoned thousands of believers on the grounds of laws forbidding or restricting their basic rights to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB): freedom to change religion or belief, freedom to share one's religion or beliefs, freedom of association, freedom of worship and assembly, or conscientious objection to military service.

North Korea is by far the country which is keeping the highest number of people in prisons and labor camps (mainly Christians) although access to information concerning individual cases is practically impossible. In 2014, four foreign Christians (American, Australian and South Korea) were detained for attempting to introduce copies of the Bible and religious books into the country. In the aftermath of the arrest of the South Korean missionary sentenced to life imprisonment in a labor camp, 33 North Koreans were arrested for helping him and could be executed. Thanks to the diplomatic efforts of the United States and Australia, their citizens could be released by the end of the year. "These cases are only the tip of the tip of the iceberg," commented Willy Fautré, director of *HRWF International*.

Indeed, "Countless numbers of persons in **North Korea** who attempt to practice their religious beliefs have been severely punished, even unto death," according to the recently released 400-page report of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) into Human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (DPRK) and to a report on "Religion and Belief in the DPRK" published on 10th December by the All Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief in UK.

In **China**, Falun Gong practitioners, whose movement was banned in 1999, are massively put in prison while 13 Catholic priests and bishops arrested by the police many years ago for being faithful to the Pope instead of swearing allegiance to the Communist Party have been missing since then. Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestants belonging to the mushrooming network of house churches out of any state control, Uyghur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, systematically suspected of separatism, are also particular targets of the regime.

In **Iran**, the Baha'is, whose movement is considered a heresy of Islam, provide the highest number of prisoners. They are followed by home-grown Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians who extensively carry out missionary activities despite the risk of imprisonment and execution. Baluchi and Kurdish Sunnis, Sufis and Zoroastrians are also particular targets of the repression.

Twenty countries in all are identified as depriving believers and atheists of their freedom in the 150-page Prisoners List of *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l*: **Azerbaijan (including secessionist Nagorno-Karabakh), Bhutan, China, Egypt, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Laos, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Sudan, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan** and **Vietnam**.

"Our annual list of prisoners covers more than 600 documented individual cases, including a special section on prisoners detained on blasphemy charges in five countries – Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia –", commented Willy Fautré, director of the Brussels-based NGO *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l*.

On the positive side it is to be stressed that **Armenia** has introduced a civilian service for conscientious objectors and has therefore stopped the systematic arrest and imprisonment of young Jehovah's Witnesses. However, in **South Korea**, 562 young objectors to military service are currently serving 18-month prison terms for. Since the Korean War, more than 18,000 Witnesses have been sentenced to a combined total of

over 34,800 years in prison for refusing to perform military service. Other countries still imprison conscientious objectors: **Eritrea** (73), **Singapore** (15), **Nagorno-Karabakh** (2), **Azerbaijan** (1), and **Turkmenistan**.

"Our best wish for the New Year is that the blacklisted countries release such prisoners of conscience and do not deprive any other believer or atheist of their freedom in 2015."

The Prisoners List can be consulted: <http://hrwf.eu/forb-intro/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>

(*) *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l* has been monitoring freedom of religion or belief as a non-religious organization for 25 years. In 2014 it covered over 60 countries where there were incidents related to freedom of religion or belief, intolerance and discrimination.

For further information, contact

Email: international.secretariat.brussels@hrwf.net

Phone: Willy Fautré +32 478 202069

How the right to deny the existence of God is under threat globally

Independent (09.12.2014) <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/how-the-right-to-deny-the-existence-of-god-is-under-threat-globally-9913662.html> - Atheists and humanists are increasingly being targeted as distinct minorities in "hate campaigns" across the globe, according to a new report which found that religious and political leaders are ratcheting up rhetoric against those who believe there is no God.

The report claims that the "hate speech" against atheists does not come exclusively from reactionary or radical religious leaders, but increasingly from political leaders, including heads of state.

The Freedom of Thought report, published by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), states: "In 2014, in addition to laws such as those targeting 'apostasy' and 'blasphemy', we have seen a marked increase in specific targeting of 'atheists' and 'humanism' as such, using these terms in a broadly correct way (the users know what they are saying) but with intent clearly borne of ignorance or intolerance toward these groups."

The report singles out Najib Razak, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, who has called "humanism and secularism as well as liberalism" a "deviant" threat to Islam and the state. In a speech to the Quran Recital Assembly Razak said: "We will not tolerate any demands or right to apostasy by Muslims."

Saudi Arabia is criticised for a new law equating "atheism" with "terrorism". The very first article of the kingdom's new terror regulations banned: "Calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion".

Secular critics of Egypt's president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the general who toppled Islamist President Mohamed Mursi, have found themselves targeted, through what the report calls "an organized backlash against young atheists".

Since the 2011 youth-driven uprising, which led to the ousting of Hosni Mubarak, many young Egyptians have begun to openly proclaim their atheist convictions, which has alarmed the country's religious institutions.

Nuamat Sati of Egypt's Ministry of Youth announced a campaign to spread awareness of "the dangers of atheism" and why it is "a threat to society", so that young atheists in particular, who are increasingly vocal on social media would be given "a chance to reconsider their decisions and go back to their religion."

Egyptian authorities have detained young atheists who appeared on television and YouTube videos talking about their right to express atheist views.

In November, in a development which the report found particularly worrying, Christian churches in Egypt say they are joining forces with Al-Azhar, a prominent centre of Sunni Muslim learning, to fight the spread of atheism in the country.

In Saudi Arabia, where a growing number of young people have privately declared themselves atheist, the consequences can be severe. Raef Badawi, in his early 30s, was accused of being atheist because he called for freedom to discuss other versions of Islam besides Wahhabism on the website "Free Saudi Liberals." Badawi was sentenced to seven years in prison and 600 lashes in July 2013.

The report found: "This year will be marked by a surge in this phenomenon of state officials and political leaders agitating specifically against non-religious people, just because they have no religious beliefs, in terms that would normally be associated with hate speech or social persecution against ethnic or religious minorities."

The Freedom of Thought Report, which rates every country in the world for anti-atheist persecution, found that almost all countries discriminate against the non-religious, in some cases through religious privilege or legal exemption.

Even Scotland came under criticism for the religiously privileged position afforded to three "religious representatives" who are required by law to be appointed to all 32 local authority education committees.

These positions require at least one Roman Catholic and one Church of Scotland representative, but non-religious people are excluded. The report also highlighted the disparity of sex and relationships education, and religious education between Roman Catholic faith schools and others in Scotland.

The report welcomed moves made earlier this year by the Church of Scotland and Humanist Society Scotland to work together to replace compulsory "religious observance" with inclusive Time for Reflection.

The report found that the most intolerant countries refuse to issue identity cards to the non-religious, sometimes taking children from atheist parents, or sentencing "apostates" to death.

Douglas McLellan, Chief Executive of the Humanist Society Scotland said: "This report is a timely reminder that humanists and atheists are all too often the victims of violence and intimidation by states around the world, and even in many Western European countries humanists and atheists face discrimination. Many commentators in Scotland still seem unable to mention humanists or atheists without adding the term 'militant' or 'aggressive'. I hope this report will make them reflect on how hurtful that is to the many millions of Scots who wish to lead an ethical and fulfilling life without reference to religion."

Anti-secular threats

Prime Minister Najib of Malaysia

"They call it human rightism, where the core beliefs are based on humanism and secularism as well as liberalism. It's deviationist in that it glorifies the desires of man alone and rejects any value system that encompasses religious norms and etiquettes. They do this on the premise of championing human rights. We will not tolerate any demands or right to apostasy by Muslims."

Nuamat Sati, in charge of Egypt's campaign at the Ministry of Youth

"The campaign has two goals. The first is to spread awareness concerning the dangers of atheism and how it creates a threat to society, as well as the controversial issues that might push the youth to atheism. The second is to treat this phenomenon by having a dialogue with atheists and giving them a chance to reconsider their decisions and go back to their religion."

Ahmed al-Tayeb, Egypt's Grand Imam and leader of the Al-Azhar

"The atheism trend is new to the Arab world and Egypt. It is regretful that some young people now openly brag about being atheists."

Blasphemy Laws: OPEN LETTER to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

Set My People Free & FOREF Europe (03.12.2014)

In re: Application of apostasy and blasphemy laws

Your Excellency,

We wish first to congratulate you on your appointment as United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. We wish you all success in encouraging compliance by UN members with their international human rights obligations. We particularly welcome the appointment as High Commissioner of one who, coming from the Middle East and an Islamic society, understands the particular challenges of implementing human rights protections in the region.

We are addressing you about the fact that 1.3 billion Muslims do not have the freedom to change their religion, an internationally guaranteed human right. As you know, individuals who try to leave Islam are often faced with torture, imprisonment and even death. Former Muslims are not allowed to exist in Islamic states.

This in contradiction to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognizes freedom of thought, conscience and belief, including the right to change one's belief. United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Professor H. Bielefeldt has emphasized that there is no religious freedom without the freedom to change one's belief.

In over 10 Islamic states the punishment for apostasy and blasphemy is death. In over 26 countries it is illegal for an individual to change his or her religion. They includes

countries like Malaysia, Jordan and Morocco, which are considered moderate Islamic countries.

This map shows where apostasy and blasphemy laws are applied.

Allow us to illustrate our concerns with several examples:

- In **Jordan**, in March 2008 relatives who then reported him to the authorities savagely beat Jordanian Christian Muhammad Abbad Abbad, who had converted from Islam fifteen years before. He was taken to the Sweilih Islamic court without legal representation and charged with apostasy. Sentenced to one week of imprisonment for contempt of court, Muhammad and his immediate family fled the country. On April 22, 2008, the court found Muhammad guilty of apostasy. It annulled his marriage and declared him to be without any religious identity. Despite the fact the family had left the country, Jordan issued arrest orders against them. As of November 2010, the family remained in another location. (Persecuted, the global assault on Christians, 2013,147).
- In **Sudan**, Meriam Yahia was sentenced to death and 100 lashes for leaving Islam, accused of apostasy and adultery by the judiciary. During her imprisonment she delivered her second baby while in chains.
- In **Pakistan**, Asia Bibi is accused of blasphemy. Her appeal was just rejected and her death sentence was upheld. She has been in prison since 2009. She is the mother of five children. For more information see: [here](#).
- Shahzad Masih and Shama Bibi, a Christian husband and his 4 month pregnant wife were beaten and then burned to death by a mob of angry Muslims at a brick kiln in Kasur, **Pakistan**. This took place on Tuesday, November 4, 2014, for alleged "blasphemy." They had four children. For more information see: [here](#).
- In **Iran**, Saeed Abedini has been in prison for two years for apostasy. Abedini was sentenced for having "undermined the Iranian government by creating a network of Christian house churches and ... attempting to sway Iranian youth away from Islam." For more information see: [here](#).
- In **Egypt**, Mohamed_Higazy has been sentenced to five years imprisonment accusation that Hegazy was involved in "activity that could damage the public interests of the state." For the last five years he has been trying to change his religion in his identity papers, but without success. For more information see: [here](#).
- In Malaysia, Mrs. Lena Joy "Azlina binti Jailani" was forced to leave the country in order to change her religion from Islam to Christianity and to be able to marry a Christian. It is illegal for a woman of Muslim decent to marry a non-Muslim. For more information see: [here](#) and [here](#).

Excellency,

Those who have left Islam face threats, not only in Islamic states, but also in other societies, including those of Europe, where authorities do not offer sufficient protection from threats; many are forced into hiding.

We plead with you, High Commissioner, to address this tragic problem as a priority of your term in office; to give 1.3 billion Muslims the freedom to change their religion.

We would welcome an opportunity to meet with you to discuss how your office and other UN institutions can work with civil society to address these issues.

This letter has been initiated by the nongovernmental organizations *Set My People Free* and the *Forum for Religions Freedom-Europe* and endorsed by others as well.

Yours sincerely,

Kamal Fahmi, President, Set My People Free
Aaron Rhodes, President, Forum for Religious Freedom - Europe
Thierry Becourt, President, CAP Freedom of Conscience / Liberté de Conscience
Willy Fautré, Chairman, Human Rights Without Frontiers
Morgana Sythove, Stichting – Foundation, Pagan Federation International
Christof Sauer, Executive Director, International Institute for Religious Freedom
Nonie Darwish, President, Former Muslims United



Freedom of religion, belief must be protected in workplace, says UN expert

Ecumenical News (24.10.2014) <http://www.ecumenicalnews.com/article/freedom-of-religion-belief-must-be-protected-in-workplace-says-un-expert-26981> - United Nations human rights expert Heiner Bielefeldt has told the U.N. General Assembly that freedom to express one's religion or belief without discrimination should be protected in the employment area.

He urged all governments to take every appropriate measure to prevent and eliminate all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, while delivering a report on October 23.

"The management of religious or belief diversity in the workplace constitutes a major challenge for today's employment policy," he said delivering his latest report to the international body.

"An increasingly diverse and mobile global workforce, expanded manufacturing demands and new production schedules can lead to conflicts between professional and religious identities and duties," said Bielefeldt.

The Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief noted that limitations of the right to manifest a person's religion or belief in the workplace, if necessary, must be specific and narrowly defined.

That way they can comply with international human rights standards.

"Both public and private employment contracts can stipulate specific work-related obligations which may limit some manifestations of an employee's religion or belief," Bielefeldt said.

"However, they can never amount to a general waiver of this human right in the workplace," he stressed.

Bielefeldt is professor of Human Rights and Human Rights Politics at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg. From 2003 to 2009, he was director of Germany's National Human Rights Institution.

In his report, the expert explores the sources of religious intolerance and discrimination in the workplace, which can be varied.

They can include prejudices existing among employers, employees or customers, restrictive interpretations of 'corporate identity' or a general fear of religious diversity..

"Many people spend a large share of their daily lives in their workplace, in which they still face restrictions to exercise the right to freedom of religion or belief," the Special Rapporteur said.

He called on States for the establishment of effective anti-discrimination legislation and monitoring mechanisms that cover employment in public and private institutions.

The human rights expert urged governments to set positive examples of respect for religious diversity in their own employment policies within State institutions.

"Good practice in this area should serve as a model to be followed in the private sector and in other societal areas," he said.

He also called on employers "to foster an atmosphere of trustful and respectful communication."

This would "allow employees, including members of religious or belief minorities, to express their problems and discuss their needs openly, as a preliminary to detecting concealed forms of intolerance and instances or patterns of indirect discrimination."

Bielefeldt's report offers a number of practical recommendations, and puts forward the concept of "reasonable accommodation" as a tool.

This can put into context the principle of non-discrimination so that appropriate individual solutions for religious minorities can be found at the workplace, he said.

USCIRF helps launch International Parliamentary Coalition to advance religious freedom

USCIRF (10.11.2014) - In the face of escalating violations worldwide of religious freedom, an initiative that the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) promoted was launched on November 8 to create a global religious freedom coalition. At the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo, 30 parliamentarians from around the world [signed](#) an unprecedented joint statement committing themselves to advance religious freedom for all. This statement, the [Charter for Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), commits parliamentarians to promote religious freedom or belief for all persons through their work and respective institutions and enhance global cooperation.

"This historic event brought together individual parliamentarians from a wide range of nations and religious communities in a united effort to galvanize support at a time when religious freedom increasingly is under attack," said USCIRF Chair Katrina Lantos Swett.

"Despite great religious, political, and regional diversity, they were unified in agreeing to combat persecution and support the principles of religious freedom that are found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

"Some of us came to this meeting from environments of safety, but we were moved by the presence of others who attended at great personal risk," said USCIRF Commissioner Mary Ann Glendon. "We owe them our best effort to ensure that this new initiative gains strength and support, and we expect this network to grow."

Countries represented included Argentina, Brazil, Burma, Canada, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Germany, Italy, Malaysia, Nepal, Norway, Pakistan, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Turkey, United Kingdom, and Uruguay. In addition, from the United States two Commissioners from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom participated, as well as the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The parliamentarians sent co-signed letters to the heads of state of [Pakistan](#) and [Burma](#) expressing concern about religious freedom violations in each country, and [wrote](#) Pope Francis to apprise him of the initiative.

Religious freedom linked to economic growth, finds global study

Religious Freedom & Business Foundation (29.05.2014) / <http://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/2/post/2014/05/religious-freedom-linked-to-economic-growth-finds-global-study.html> – Religious freedom is one of only three factors significantly associated with global economic growth, according to a **new study** by researchers at Georgetown University and Brigham Young University. The study looked at GDP growth for 173 countries in 2011 and controlled for two-dozen different financial, social, and regulatory influences.

As the world navigates away from years of poor economic performance, religious freedom may be an unrecognized asset to economic recovery and growth, according to this new study. The study examines and finds a positive relationship between religious freedom and ten of the twelve pillars of global competitiveness, as measured by the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index(see example in chart).

The study, however, goes beyond simple correlations by empirically testing and finding the tandem effects of government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion (as measured by the Pew Research Center) to be detrimental to economic growth while controlling for 23 other theoretical, economic, political, social, and demographic factors.

The new study also furthers previous work in the field, including *The Price of Freedom Denied* (by Brian Grim & Roger Finke, Cambridge, 2011). Grim & Finke's research showed that religious freedom is a key ingredient to peace and stability, as measured by the absence of violent religious persecution and conflict. This is particularly important for business because where stability exists, there is more opportunity to invest and conduct normal and predictable business operations, especially in emerging and new markets.

The new study observes that religious hostilities and restrictions create climates that can drive away local and foreign investment, undermine sustainable development, and disrupt huge sectors of economies. Such has occurred in the ongoing cycle of religious

regulation and hostilities in Egypt, which has adversely affected the tourism industry, among other sectors. Perhaps most significant for future economic growth, the study notes that young entrepreneurs are pushed to take their talents elsewhere due to the instability associated with high and rising religious restrictions and hostilities.

Religious freedom when respected within a company can also directly benefit the bottom line. This includes both improved morale and lower costs. For instance, the clothing retailer Abercrombie & Fitch fought and lost a religious discrimination case in 2013 related to firing a Muslim stock girl for wearing a scarf in violation of the company's dress code. The case resulted not only in substantial legal costs but also in negative national publicity.

Moreover, freedom of religion or belief is a human right protected in numerous treaties and agreements, including the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The study suggests that businesses may gain a competitive advantage by meeting the expectations of stakeholders who are increasingly demanding that companies play a positive role in addressing issues of social concern and fairness.

The study's findings are timely given the rising tide of restrictions on religious freedom documented by Pew Research, showing that 76% of the world's people currently live with high religious restrictions or hostilities. And the findings are especially relevant because the research shows that the largest markets for potential growth are in countries where religious freedom is highly restricted - casting a question mark over the long-term sustainability of growth in countries such as China.

- The full report, "Is Religious Freedom Good for Business?: A Conceptual and Empirical Analysis," is available on the website of the Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion (IJRR). The authors of the study are Brian J. Grim, Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, and Greg Clark and Robert Edward Snyder, Brigham Young University's International Center for Law and Religion Studies.

Naming and shaming: 8 countries egregiously violating religious freedom

By Brian Pellot

Index on Censorship (30.04.2014) /

<http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2014/04/naming-shaming-8-countries-egregiously-violating-religious-freedom/> - In January, **Index summarised** the U.S. State Department's "**Countries of Particular Concern**" — those that severely violate religious freedom rights within their borders. This list has remained static since 2006 and includes Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Uzbekistan. These countries not only suppress religious expression, they systematically torture and detain people who cross political and social red lines around faith.

Today the **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)**, an independent watchdog panel created by Congress to review international religious freedom conditions, released its 15th annual report recommending that the State Department double its list of worst offenders to include Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Vietnam and Syria.

Here's a roundup of the systematic, ongoing and egregious religious freedom violations unfolding in each.

1. Egypt

The promise of religious freedom that came with a revised constitution and ousted Islamist president last year has **yet to transpire**. An increasing number of dissident Sunnis, Coptic Christians, Shiite Muslims, atheists and other religious minorities are being arrested for "ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife" under the country's blasphemy law. Attacks against these groups are seldom investigated. Freedom of belief is theoretically "absolute" in the new constitution approved in January, but only for Muslims, Christians and Jews. Baha'is are considered apostates, denied state identity cards and banned from engaging in public religious activities, as are Jehovah's Witnesses. Egyptian courts sentenced **529 Islamist supporters to death** in March and another **683** in April, though most of the March sentences have been commuted to life in prison. Courts also recently upheld the **five-year prison sentence of writer** Karam Saber, who allegedly committed blasphemy in his work.

2. Iraq

Iraq's constitution guarantees religious freedom, but the government has largely failed to prevent religiously-motivated sectarian attacks. About two-thirds of Iraqi residents identify as Shiite and one-third as Sunni. Christians, Yezidis, Sabeen-Mandaeans and other faith groups are dwindling as these minorities and **atheists flee the country** amid discrimination, persecution and fear. Baha'is, long considered apostates, are banned, as are followers of Wahhabism. Sunni-Shia tensions have been exacerbated recently by the crisis in neighboring Syria and extremist attacks against religious pilgrims on religious holidays. A proposed personal status law favoring Shiism is expected to deepen divisions if passed and has been **heavily criticized** for allowing girls to marry as young as nine.

3. Nigeria

Nigeria is roughly divided north-south between Islam and Christianity with a sprinkling of indigenous faiths throughout. Sectarian tensions along these geographic lines are further complicated by ethnic, political and economic divisions. Laws in Nigeria protect religious freedom, but rule of law is severely lacking. As a result, the government has failed to stop Islamist group **Boko Haram** from terrorizing and methodically slaughtering Christians and Muslim critics. An estimated 16,000 people have been killed and many houses of worship destroyed in the past 15 years as a result of violence between Christians and Muslims. The vast majority of these crimes have gone unpunished. Christians in Muslim-majority northern states regularly complain of discrimination in the spheres of education, employment, land ownership and media.

4. Pakistan

Pakistan's record on religious freedom is dismal. Harsh **anti-blasphemy laws** are regularly evoked to settle personal and communal scores. Although no one has been executed for blasphemy in the past 25 years, dozens charged with the crime have fallen victim to vigilantism with impunity. Violent extremists from among Pakistan's Taliban and Sunni Muslim majority regularly target the country's many religious minorities, which include Shiites, Sufis, Christians, Hindus, Zoroastrians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Baha'is. Ahmadis are considered heretics and are prevented from identifying as Muslim, as the case of **British Ahmadi Masud Ahmad** made all too clear in recent months. Ahmadis are politically disenfranchised and Hindu marriages are not state-recognized. Laws must be consistent with Islam, the state religion, and freedom of expression is constitutionally "subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam," fostering a culture of self-censorship.

5. Tajikistan

Religious freedom has rapidly deteriorated since Tajikistan's 2009 religion law severely curtailed free exercise. Muslims, who represent 90 percent of the population, are heavily monitored and restricted in terms of education, dress, pilgrimage participation, imam selection and sermon content. All religious groups must register with the government. Proselytizing and private religious education are forbidden, minors are banned from participating in most religious activities and Muslim women face many restrictions on communal worship. Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned from the country since 2007 for their conscientious objection to military service, as have several other religious groups. Hundreds of unregistered mosques have been closed in recent years, and "inappropriate" religious texts are regularly confiscated.

6. Turkmenistan

The religious freedom situation in Turkmenistan is similar to that of Tajikistan but worse due to the country's extraordinary political isolation and government repression. Turkmenistan's constitution guarantees religious freedom, but many laws, most notably the 2003 religion law, contradict these provisions. All religious organizations must register with the government and remain subject to raids and harassment even if approved. Shiite Muslim groups, Protestant groups and Jehovah's Witnesses have all had their registration applications denied in recent years. Private worship is forbidden and foreign travel for pilgrimages and religious education are greatly restricted. The government hires and fires clergy, censors religious texts, and fines and imprisons believers for their convictions.

7. Vietnam

Vietnam's government uses vague national security laws to suppress religious freedom and freedom of expression as a means of maintaining its authority and control. A 2005 decree warns that "abuse" of religious freedom "to undermine the country's peace, independence, and unity" is illegal and that religious activities must not "negatively affect the cultural traditions of the nation." Religious diversity is high in Vietnam, with half the population claiming some form of Buddhism and the rest identifying as Catholic, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Protestant, Muslim or with other small faith and non-religious communities. Religious groups that register with the government are **allowed to grow but are closely monitored** by specialized police forces, who employ violence and intimidation to repress unregistered groups.

8. Syria

The ongoing Syrian crisis is now being fought along sectarian lines, greatly diminishing religious freedom in the country. President Bashar al-Assad's forces, aligned with Hezbollah and Shabiha, have targeted Syria's majority-Sunni Muslim population with religiously-divisive rhetoric and attacks. Extremist groups on the other side, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), have targeted Christians and Alawites in their fight for an Islamic state devoid of religious tolerance or diversity. Many Syrians choose their allegiances based on their families' faith in order to survive. It's important to note that all human rights, not just religious freedom, are suffering in Syria and in neighboring refugee camps. In quieter times, proselytizing, conversion from Islam and some interfaith marriages are restricted, and all religious groups must officially register with the government.

Report: State Department should double list of worst religious freedom offenders

By Brian Pellot

The Washington Post (30.04.2014) / http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/report-state-department-should-double-list-of-worst-religious-freedom-offenders/2014/04/30/b15c281a-d08b-11e3-a714-be7e7f142085_story.html - Secretary of State John Kerry should cite 16 countries for severe violations of religious freedom, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended Wednesday (April 30) in its 15th annual report.

The State Department's "Countries of Particular Concern" list has remained static since 2006, when eight countries — Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan — were designated as CPCs.

USCIRF, an independent watchdog panel created by Congress to review international religious freedom conditions, criticized the government's unchanged list of CPCs and sanctions against them, claiming such measures have "provided little incentive for CPC-designated governments to reduce or halt egregious violations of religious freedom."

"The past 10 years have seen a worsening of the already-poor religious freedom environment in Pakistan, a continued dearth of religious freedom in Turkmenistan, backsliding in Vietnam, rising violations in Egypt before and after the Arab Spring, and Syria's descent into a sectarian civil war with all sides perpetrating egregious religious freedom violations. Yet no new countries have been added to the State Department's CPC list," the report states.

USCIRF recommended that the CPC list be expanded to include these countries along with Iraq, Nigeria and Tajikistan. USCIRF's 2013 report made similar recommendations, with the noteworthy addition this year of Syria.

"Syria was added for the abuses against religious freedom being committed not just by the Assad regime but by all sides in the terrible civil war those people are suffering through," USCIRF chair Robert P. George said.

"The Syrian crisis has devolved largely into a sectarian conflict," the report states, citing as evidence the regime's targeting of Syria's majority-Sunni Muslim population and extremist opposition groups targeting Christians and Alawites because of their faith. "The existing humanitarian disaster and egregious human rights and religious freedom violations pose a serious danger to Syria's religious diversity post-conflict."

USCIRF was created with the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, which sought to prioritize religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy. IRFA requires the State Department, on behalf of the president, to identify and take action when countries engage in systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom.

"A tragedy on many levels, Syria also represents one of the worst situations in the world for religious freedom, yet the IRFA tools are almost irrelevant to address the actions of terrorist organizations fighting a brutal, dictatorial regime or when the longstanding government is no longer seen as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people," the

report states, recommending that IRFA's tools be updated to better address nonstate violators.

In addition to CPC designations, USCIRF's annual report documents political, economic, social and civic effects of religious freedom restrictions and abuses around the world and recommends ways to promote religious freedom more effectively at the U.S. foreign policy level.

This year's report recommends that the vacant post of ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom be filled quickly. Suzan Johnson Cook left that role in October. President Obama said he looked forward to nominating the next ambassador-at-large in February. Reports suggest that the administration is vetting candidates, but the position has remained vacant for more than six months.

The report also recommends that the ambassador-at-large have greater access to the secretary of state and that the Office of International Religious Freedom be better-resourced and -staffed.

"Our government's focus on religious freedom has to some extent been lost. That's why we're putting so much emphasis on the need for the nation to refocus on this human right, and we need our leaders to keep that focus constant," George said.

In addition to its 16 recommended CPCs, USCIRF lists 10 "Tier 2" countries where religious freedom violations are serious but do not fully meet the CPC standard. These countries are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia, Russia and Turkey.

Religious hostilities impact more people than government restrictions on religious freedom

The Weekly Number (14.01.2014) - 74% of people - more than 5 billion - live in countries where high levels of religious hostilities limit religious freedom. By contrast, 64% of people live in countries with high government restrictions on religious freedom.

The share of countries with a high or very high level of social hostilities involving religion reached a six-year peak in 2012, according to a new study by the Pew Research Center

<http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high>

A third (33%) of the 198 countries and territories included in the study had high religious hostilities in 2012, up from 29% in 2011 and 20% as of mid-2007. Religious hostilities increased in every major region of the world except the Americas.

The sharpest increase was in the Middle East and North Africa, which still is feeling the effects of the 2010-11 political uprisings known as the Arab Spring. There also was a significant increase in religious hostilities in the Asia-Pacific region, where China edged into the "high" category for the first time.

The new report - released two days ahead of Religious Freedom Day (16 January) in the United States - is the fifth in a series of Pew Research reports

(<http://www.pewforum.org/category/publications/restrictions-on-religion>) based on two indexes used to gauge the extent to which governments and societies around the world impinge on religious beliefs and practices.

The share of countries with a high or very high level of government restrictions on religion stayed roughly the same in the latest year studied. About three-in-ten countries in the world (29%) had a high or very high level of government restrictions in 2012, compared with 28% in 2011 and 20% as of mid-2007.

Europe had the biggest increase in the median level of government restrictions in 2012, followed closely by the Middle East-North Africa - the only other region where the median level of government restrictions on religion rose.

Looking at the overall level of restrictions - whether resulting from government policies or from social hostilities - the study finds that restrictions on religion are high or very high in 43% of countries, also a six-year high. Because some of these countries (like China) are very populous, more than 5.3 billion people (76% of the world's population) live in countries with a high or very high level of restrictions on religion, up from 74% in 2011 and 68% as of mid-2007.

Among the world's 25 most populous countries, Egypt, Indonesia, Russia, Pakistan and Burma (Myanmar) had the most restrictions on religion in 2012, when both government restrictions and social hostilities are taken into account. As in the previous year, Pakistan had the highest level of social hostilities involving religion, and Egypt had the highest level of government restrictions on religion. Social hostilities related to religion in Burma (Myanmar) rose to the "very high" level for the first time in the study.

During the latest year studied, there also was an increase in the level of harassment or intimidation of particular religious groups. Indeed, two of the seven major religious groups monitored by the study - Muslims and Jews - experienced six-year highs in the number of countries in which they were harassed by national, provincial or local governments, or by individuals or groups in society. As in previous years, Christians and Muslims - who together make up more than half of the global population - were harassed in the largest number of countries (110 and 109, respectively).

The new study scores 198 countries and territories on the same 10-point indexes used in the previous Pew Research studies on religious restrictions around the globe:

- The Government Restrictions Index (GRI) measures government laws, policies and actions that restrict religious beliefs and practices. The GRI is comprised of 20 measures of restrictions, including efforts by governments to ban particular faiths, prohibit conversions, limit preaching or give preferential treatment to one or more religious groups.
- The Social Hostilities Index (SHI) measures acts of religious hostility by private individuals, organizations or groups in society. This includes religion-related armed conflict or terrorism, mob or sectarian violence, harassment over attire for religious reasons or other religion related intimidation or abuse. The SHI includes 13 measures of social hostilities.

The full report, "Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High," is available on the website of the Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, as are the previous reports in the series:

<http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/>

The Pew Research Center's work on global restrictions on religion is part of the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures project, which analyzes religious change and its

impact on societies around the world. The initiative is funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and the John Templeton Foundation.

Christian deaths double in 2014 World Watch List

More 'killed for faith' in Syria in 2013 than in whole world during 2012

World Watch Monitor (08.01.2014) - Nearly twice as many Christians died for their faith in the past year than in 2012, according to Open Doors International's 2014 World Watch List.

Open Doors International, a charity that supports Christians under pressure for their faith, said 2,123 Christians were reported to have been killed during the 12 months ending Oct. 31, 2013. That compares to 1,201 during the previous 12 months. During the most recent period, more Christians were killed in Syria alone than were killed globally in the previous year.

The World Watch List, which annually monitors the media worldwide for all reported incidents, emphasises that this is the "very, very minimum" count – only those who have been documented as killed.

Estimates of the total number killed range from around 7,000 or 8,000, according to the International Institute for Religious Freedom's Thomas Schirrmacher, to the lofty 100,000 estimate of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity.

Beyond those killed, the World Watch List recommends that three more categories of Christians should be considered: Christians whose death is never reported; Christians killed due to increased vulnerability, such as those in conflict areas; and Christians who die due to long-term discrimination.

Taking these into account, as well as those whose deaths are reported by the media, the World Watch List suggests Schirrmacher's estimation is roughly accurate, although the figure may be higher still.

"Christians aren't always directly killed, but are so much squeezed with regulations and vulnerabilities that they just perish – not at once, but in the course of years. If we would include them in the counting, it would be an enormous number of people. However, the precise number of Christians who die due to these factors is very difficult to quantify," according to the World Watch List.

Not surprisingly, Syria heads the list of the countries in which the most Christians were killed for their faith (1,213), followed by Nigeria (612), Pakistan (88) and Egypt (83).

Of the top 10, six are in Africa – with Kenya (20), Angola (16), Niger (15) and the Central African Republic (9) joining Nigeria and Egypt on the list.

The World Watch List states that the number of Christians killed in the Central African Republic is especially likely to have been under-reported because "most analysts still failed to recognise the religious dimension of the conflict". The list says the same is true of North Korea, where "it is extremely difficult to get public information".

Beyond the number of Christians killed, the World Watch List focuses upon other instances of violence, including: physical aggression; threats; the destruction of churches or other Christian buildings; attempts to destroy churches or Christian buildings; the closure of churches or Christian buildings; house expulsion or destruction; kidnap for ransom or intimidation; sexual assault; arrests; and displacement.

Considering only the sum of violent incidents recorded, Egypt (167) tops the list, followed by India (125) and Nigeria (118).

Vatican - Pastoral care workers killed in 2013

Agenzia Fides (03.01.2014) - According to information in our possession, during 2013, 22 pastoral care workers were killed worldwide (mostly priests), almost double compared to 13 who were killed in 2012. On the night of December 31, 2013 and January 1, 2014, Fr. Eric Freed, a priest in Eureka, California was killed: The police are investigating to determine the reasons of such murder.

For the fifth consecutive year, the place most affected, with an extremely elevated number of pastoral care workers killed is LATIN AMERICA, especially in Colombia. The pastoral care workers who died violently in 2013 are: 19 priests, 1 religious sister, 2 lay persons. In America: 15 priests (7 in Colombia, 4 in Mexico, 1 in Brazil, 1 in Venezuela, 1 in Panama, 1 in Haiti) were killed; in Africa: 1 priest was killed in Tanzania, 1 religious sister in Madagascar, 1 lay person in Nigeria were killed; in Asia 1 priest in India and 1 in Syria were killed; in the Philippines 1 lay person was killed; in Europe a priest was killed in Italy.

As it has been for some time, Fides' list does not only include missionaries ad gentes in the strict sense, but all pastoral care workers who died violent deaths. We do not propose to use the term "martyrs", if not in its etymological meaning of "witnesses" since it is up to the Church to judge their possible merits and also because of the scarcity of available information in most cases, with regard to their life and even the circumstances of their death.

In 2013 the beatification process of the six Italian missionary Sisters of the Poor of Bergamo was opened, who died in Congo in 1995 after having contracted the Ebola virus in order not to leave the population without health care, defined as "martyrs of love". Instead the diocesan phase of the beatification process of Luisa Mistrali Guidotti, a member of the Women's Medical Missionary Association was completed, who was killed in 1979 in the then Rhodesia, while accompanying a pregnant woman at risk in labor to the hospital. The cause of beatification of Father Mario Vergara, a missionary of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME), and the lay catechist Isidore Ngei Ko Lat, killed in hatred of faith in Myanmar in 1950 was opened. On April 25 the beatification of Father Pino Puglisi was celebrated: "his gentleness and his unceasing missionary work, collided with a logic of life opposed to faith, that of the mafia, that hindered his pastoral action with intimidation, threats and beatings, to the point of killing him, in hatred of faith" wrote the Bishops of Sicily.

There is still much concern regarding the fate of many other pastoral care workers who have been kidnapped or disappeared, of whom there has been no news, such as the three Congolese Augustinian priests of the Assumption, kidnapped in North Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo in October 2012, and a Colombian priest who has disappeared for months. While the terrible conflict that has plunged Syria in blood for three years does not spare the Christians: we have not had any news of the Italian Jesuit Fr. Paul Dall'Oglio for a long time, of the two metropolitan Bishops of Aleppo - the Greek

Orthodox Boulos al-Yazigi and the Syrian Orthodox Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, of the Orthodox nuns of the monastery of Santa Tecla. Fr. Georges Vandenbeusch, the French "Fidei Donum" priest has just been released, who had been kidnapped on November 13 in his parish home in Nguetchewe, Cameroon.

The majority of the pastoral care workers in 2013 were killed in attempted robbery, and in some cases violently attacked, a sign of the climate of moral decline, economic and cultural poverty, which generates violence and disregard for human life. They all lived in these human and social contexts, carrying out the mission of proclaiming the Gospel message without making sensational acts, but by witnessing their faith in the humility of daily life.

As pointed out by the Holy Father, "in 2,000 years, a vast host of men and women have sacrificed their lives to remain faithful to Jesus Christ and his Gospel" (Angelus, 23 June 2013).

The provisional list compiled annually by Fides, must therefore be added to the long list of many of whom there may never be news, who in every corner of the world suffer and even pay with their lives for their faith in Christ: "let us think about our many Christian brothers and sisters who are suffering persecution for their faith. There are so many. Perhaps more now than in past centuries. Jesus is with them. We too are united to them with our prayers and our love; we admire their courage and their witness. They are our brothers and sisters who, in many parts of the world, are suffering for their faithfulness to Jesus Christ" (Pope Francis, Angelus, 17 November 2013).

8 countries on UN Human Rights Council restrict religious freedom

Washington Post (31.10.2013) - Eight of the 47 countries that hold seats on the United Nations Human Rights Council imprisoned people in 2013 under laws that restrict religious freedom, according to a new report from Human Rights Without Frontiers International, a nonprofit advocacy organization based in Belgium.

The eight UNHRC member states on the group's second annual World Freedom of Religion or Belief Prisoners List, released Monday (Dec. 30), are Morocco, China and Saudi Arabia (whose new three-year terms begin Wednesday) and current members India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Libya and South Korea.

Hundreds of believers and atheists were imprisoned in these and 16 other countries for exercising religious freedom or freedom of expression rights related to religious issues, according to the report. These rights include the freedom to change religions, share beliefs, object to military service on conscientious grounds, worship, assemble and associate freely. Violations related to religious defamation and blasphemy are also included in the report.

According to the report's findings from 2013:

* In China, Protestants, Catholics, Buddhists, Muslims and Falun Gong adherents were arrested for proselytizing, holding illegal gatherings, providing religious education classes and publicizing their persecution.

* In Morocco, a convert to Christianity was arrested and fined for "shaking the faith of a Muslim" by sharing his newfound beliefs.

* In Saudi Arabia, 52 Ethiopian Christians were arrested for participating in a private religious service.

* In India, Protestants were arrested for holding private prayer meetings.

* In Indonesia, a Pentecostal pastor was arrested for holding religious services without a valid permit, and an atheist was sentenced to 30 months in prison for starting an atheist Facebook page where he posted the words "God does not exist."

* In Kazakhstan, an atheist was arrested for allegedly inciting religious hatred in his writings.

* In Libya, foreign missionaries, dozens of Coptic Christians and a Protestant were arrested and allegedly tortured for proselytizing.

* In South Korea, nearly 600 Jehovah's Witnesses were serving prison sentences for conscientious objection to mandatory military service.

The report designates China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea and South Korea as countries of particular concern for the highest number of religious freedom prisoners. The U.S. State Department's latest International Religious Freedom Report includes Saudi Arabia on its list of worst offenders.

"Human Rights Without Frontiers is alarmed by the evolution of the UN Human Rights Council which accepts as members an increasing number of countries perpetrating egregious violations of human rights and, in particular, of religious freedom," the group said in a statement.

The UNHRC replaced the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in 2006, in part "to redress (the Commission's) shortcoming," which included granting membership to countries with poor human rights records. The resolution establishing the revamped UNHRC declares that member states "shall uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights."

But that's not happening, said Willy Fautre, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers.

"Our best wish for the New Year is that these and the other member states of the Human Rights Council may give the good example to other nations of the world by releasing such prisoners of conscience and not depriving any other believer or atheist of their freedom in 2014," he said in a statement.

Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the U.N. General Assembly adopted in 1948, explicitly protect freedom of thought, conscience, religion, opinion and expression.

The U.N. General Assembly has the power to suspend the rights of UNHRC members that commit serious human rights violations. Libya became the first and only country to be suspended from the council in 2011 amid the Gaddafi regime's brutal suppression of protesters. Libya was readmitted to the council eight months later under new leadership.

Other media outlets:

The Baptist Standard <http://www.baptiststandard.com/news/world/15949-report-8-countries-on-un-human-rights-council-restrict-religious-freedom> (2 Jan)

American Religious Freedom Newsroom <http://religiousfreedomnews.org/report-8-countries-on-un-human-rights-council-restrict-religious-freedom-20131231> (31 Dec 2013)

RNS - Religion News Service <http://www.religionnews.com/2013/12/31/report-8-countries-un-human-rights-council-restrict-religious-freedom/> (31 Dec)

The Muslim Times <http://www.themuslimtimes.org/2013/12/asia/report-8-countries-on-un-human-rights-council-restrict-religious-freedom> (31 Dec)

Religion Today <http://www.religiontoday.com/news/u-n-human-rights-council-fails-to-protect-religious-freedom.html> (30 Dec)

The Christian Century <http://www.christiancentury.org/contributor/brian-pellot> (31 Dec)

The Institute For Global Church Studies (IGCS) Forum <http://igcsforum.org/showthread.php?t=7186> (31 Dec)

Inspiratos <http://www.inspiratos.org/2014/01/03/report-8-countries-on-un-human-rights-council-restrict-religious-freedom/>

Foundation Life <http://foundationlife.net/2013/12/31/report-8-countries-on-un-human-rights-council-restrict-religious-freedom/> (31 Dec)

Charisma News <http://www.charismanews.com/component/search/?searchword=Brian%20Pellot/RNS&ordering=newest&searchphrase=exact&areas%5B0%5D=authors> (2 Jan)

Alliance Alert <http://www.alliancealert.org/tag/topic-united-nations-human-rights-council/> (2 Jan)

One Saint <http://www.onesaint.org/4/post/2013/12/un-human-rights-council-a-joke.html> (31 Dec)

Center for Inquiry http://www.centerforinquiry.net/blogs/entry/12_31_13/ (31 Dec)

Found on Twitter

Uri Global <http://www.uri.org/> retweeted the news on 3 Jan

Oslo Freedom Forum <http://www.oslofreedomforum.com/> retweeted on 3 Jan

Project Interfaith <http://projectinterfaith.org/> 2 Jan

Uscirf <http://www.uscirf.gov/> 2 Jan

International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) <http://www.irla.org/> 2 Jan

Human Rights News <http://humanrights.einnews.com/> 2 Jan