

Report notes religious persecution in 199 countries

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WASHINGTON (BP)—Millions continue to suffer religious persecution globally, with wars and civil conflicts exacerbating already existing ills in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa, the U.S. State Department documented in its [2023 Report on International Religious Freedom](#).

The report on 199 countries and territories attempts to present a nonbiased overview of persecution by governments, extremists and members of society, relying on information from government officials, religious groups, nongovernmental organizations, journalists, human rights monitors, academia, media and others.

Concurrently, the report notes advances in religious freedom and the United States' commitment to continue advancing the freedom U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken deemed "an essential part of what it means to be human: the ability ... to decide on our own what we believe or don't believe without fear of repression."

"Today, governments around the world continue to target individuals, shutter places of worship, forcibly displace communities, and imprison people because of their religious beliefs," Blinken said in releasing the report on June 26.

"In every region, people continue to face religious-based violence, religious-based discrimination, both from governments and their fellow citizens. They may be shut out of schools, denied jobs, harassed, beaten, or worse."

Escalations of religious persecution amid wartime and civil conflicts were

noted in several reports including Israel, the West Bank and Gaza; Ethiopia, Haiti, Niger, Russia, Ukraine, Sudan, Mali and other countries.

“Since Hamas’s horrific terrorist attack on Israel on October 7 and the subsequent conflict in Gaza, both antisemitism and Islamophobia have increased significantly across the globe,” Blinken said.

“Here in the United States, reports of hate crimes and other incidents targeting both Muslims and Jews have gone up dramatically.”

Among wartime escalations noted:

- In Russia-occupied territories of Ukraine, all religious groups except the Ukraine Orthodox Church were required to undergo “state religious expert evaluations” and register with Russia-led occupation authorities. Most religious groups recognized under Ukrainian law were unable to register because of Russian laws applied to occupied areas discouraging registration.
- In Russia, there were widespread reports Russia’s armed forces and other Russian authorities in Ukraine engaged in numerous abuses of religious freedom, including detaining religious leaders and shelling religious institutions and cultural heritage sites. Nongovernmental organizations reported as many as 630 religious properties in Ukraine damaged, destroyed or occupied by Russian forces between the beginning of the war and April 2023.
- In the West Bank and Gaza, in conflicts before Hamas’ Oct. 7 invasion of Israel, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories reported 237 Palestinians and 30 Israelis were killed, among other aggressions between Jan. 1 and Oct. 7.
- In Sudan, after fighting broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, religious

freedom protections remained unimplemented, with both warring factions committing targeted assaults and indiscriminate shelling on churches, mosques and religious communities.

- In Haiti, gang violence and general insecurity greatly hampered religious freedom. Gangs kidnapped religious leaders and congregants for ransom, demanded higher “protection” payments from church leaders, and targeted Catholic leaders because of a historical perception that Catholic churches are financially wealthy.

Among threats to religious freedom, Blinken noted blasphemy laws in Pakistan, the use of antisemitic tropes and anti-Muslim rhetoric by government officials in Hungary, and government penalties against religious leaders who criticize the Hungarian government.

He also noted laws in nine European nations banning religious clothing in public spaces; and in India, anti-conversion laws, hate speech, and the destruction of homes and places of worship in minority faith communities.

Blinken said the United States has dedicated more than \$100 million to building religious freedom globally since 2021.

“We’ve provided legal assistance to people who are facing religious persecution. We’ve trained thousands of human rights defenders who are helping to document abuses,” Blinken said. “We’ve also continued hundreds of millions of dollars in humanitarian aid to support those fleeing religious oppression.”