

# **Watch list shows impact of pandemic on religious persecution**

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a number of existing problems—political divides, inequities, conspiracy theories. It also has exposed religious persecution in a number of countries, Open Doors reports.

In India, the Christian watchdog organization said 80 percent of Christians who received pandemic aid from its partner organizations reported they had been turned away from other food distribution points because of their faith. Others reported they'd been passed over for employment.

Some had walked miles and hidden their religious affiliation in order just to get food, it said.

“We’ve definitely seen that both extremists and governments are taking advantage of or using this opportunity to justify an increase in persecution,” Open Doors USA President and CEO David Curry told Religion News Service.

Not surprisingly, the impact of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, featured prominently in Open Doors’ 2021 World Watch List report, released Jan. 13.

## **Christians denied aid during pandemic**

India is No. 10 in Open Doors’ ranking of the 50 countries where Christians face the most persecution for their faith in 2021, due to what Curry called

the BJP party's "nationalist agenda that wants to solidify around the Hindu faith."

Other hot spots where Christians face discrimination while seeking COVID-19 relief include Myanmar, Nepal, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Central Asia, Malaysia, North Africa, Yemen and Sudan, according to the report.

"The global pandemic made persecution more obvious than ever—simply because so many people needed help," according to Open Doors' report accompanying its annual World Watch List.

"The clear discrimination and oppression suffered by Christians in 2020 must not be forgotten, even after the COVID-19 crisis fades into our collective memory."

## **North Korea tops the World Watch List again**

North Korea leads the organization's annual World Watch List for the 20th straight year.

The rest of the top 10 lineup also remains largely unchanged from last year, with Sudan dropping off the list and Nigeria appearing at No. 9.

More Christians are murdered for their faith in Nigeria than in any other country, according to Open Doors. The organization blames violent attacks by Islamic extremist groups like Boko Haram and the Fulani, which Curry said mimic the rise of ISIS in Iraq.

The president and CEO said Sudan's drop to No. 13 is the rare bit of good news this year, coming as the country scraps its blasphemy law.

Those 10 countries where Open Doors reports Christians face the most persecution are North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, Pakistan, Eritrea, Yemen, Iran, Nigeria and India.

Most of the countries in the top 10 have been there since 2015, which, at the time, Open Doors proclaimed to be the “worst year in modern history for Christian persecution.”

“I’m afraid I could repeat that same statement,” Curry said before the 2021 report’s release.

## **China back on the Top 20 list**

China entered Open Doors’ top 20 for the first time in a decade this year for its increasing surveillance and censorship of Christians and other religious minorities, according to the report. Last year, Open Doors raised the alarm over the “rise of the surveillance state” and its impact on Christians and Uighur Muslims there.

In the 50 countries on the World Watch List, 309 million Christians experience “very high” or “extreme” levels of persecution and discrimination, according to Open Doors. That’s one in eight Christians worldwide, it said.

Open Doors defines persecution as “any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions toward Christians.”

It creates its ranking by measuring and tracking reports of violence, as well as surveying field staff about pressures Christians face from governments, family and other institutions in each country.

It’s important for people to be informed about the patterns of persecution happening around the world, which could be replicated elsewhere, Curry

said.

“But right now, I think what we see is it’s much more intense in every region around the world than anything you might see here in the West,” he said.