

THE OPEN DOORS WORLD WATCH LIST, 2009

Explanation of the World Watch List

The World Watch List is compiled from a specially-designed questionnaire of 50 questions covering various aspects of religious freedom. 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 differentiate between the legal, official status of Christians (e.g. 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 Top Ten Ranking

This year's number one on the World Watch List is no stranger: **North Korea** has topped the list for seven years in a row now. There is no other country in the world where Christians are being persecuted in such a horrible and relentless way. The Wahhabi kingdom of **Saudi Arabia** holds a solid second place, sharing the same amount of points with a country that's also ruled by Sharia law: **Iran**. Islam also is the official religion in **Afghanistan**, **Somalia** and the **Maldives**; the countries in the fourth, fifth and sixth position. **Afghanistan** rose from seventh to fourth place. The country moved up on the list as a result of increased pressure from the Taliban movement during 2008; the situation in the country is tense. On seventh place we come across **Yemen**, whose position changed from six to seven but there was no major change in the lack of religious freedom for Christians in Yemen in 2008. There was no big change to the status of religious freedom in **Laos**; the country is still number eight on the list. Two new countries have entered the top ten: **Somalia** and **Eritrea**. For **Eritrea** the total number of points did not change compared to last year, but other countries dropping off the top ten made it go up. Nevertheless the deplorable situation of Christians in this country very much justifies a position in the top ten. In **Somalia** the number of incidents against Christians increased dramatically in 2008, explaining its rise from twelve to five. For **China** and **Bhutan**, countries that dropped out of the top ten, an explanation is given in the section “Changes for the Better.”

Islam is the majority religion in seven of the top ten countries: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, Somalia, Maldives, Yemen and Uzbekistan. Two countries have communist governments: North Korea and Laos. Eritrea is the only dictatorial country in the 10 highest countries on the list.

Changes for the Worse – Summary ¹

The status of religious freedom for Christians deteriorated in 2008 in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan, Iraq, Mauritania, Algeria, India, Nigeria (North), Indonesia, Bangladesh and Kazakhstan.

In Saudi Arabia, there was hardly any change in the lack of religious freedom for Christians in 2008. We received more information on incidents against Christians, which led to an increase in points: amongst others a case of honour killing of a convert and more reports of Christians arrested for their involvement in religious activities than during the previous year.

As a result of some dramatic developments for Christians during 2008, the total amount of points for **Iran** rose. A major crackdown on house churches occurred and a large number of Christians were arrested, marking 2008 as one of the toughest years regarding Christian persecution since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. A Christian couple died after interrogation by government officials, due to injuries and stress caused during captivity.

In Afghanistan, pressure from the Taliban movement has increased during 2008 and the situation in the country is tense. A Western Christian aid worker in the capital Kabul was killed because, according to the Taliban, she was spreading Christianity in Afghanistan which is prohibited by law in the country. Kidnappings of aid workers have also increased a lot. However, most pressure against local Christians comes from within their family and social network.

During 2008, a considerable deterioration of the situation in **Somalia** occurred. The fighting between Somali Islamic militias and Ethiopian forces reportedly led to an increase in hostility towards Christians in several parts of the war torn East African country. In total, we received reports of at least ten Christians being killed for their faith in 2008 and several others kidnapped and raped.

Pressure on the Christian minority in **Pakistan** continued unabated. However, we received more concrete figures on persecution and learned about increasing difficulties in church building. These are the main causes of the deterioration of Pakistan's religious freedom score.

After a short period of fragile peace in **Iraq** at the end of 2007, Iraq's Christian minority was faced with a year full of violence in 2008. Churches were attacked or damaged by bombs, Christians received death threats and several Christians were murdered, abused and/or kidnapped.

Like the previous year, the total points for **Mauritania** increased considerably in 2008. We received more information on this country in 2008 which indicated that the situation did not deteriorate for Christians but is even worse than previously expected. There were a few alarming developments during the past year. The Mauritanian media are portraying Christianity as a wicked movement that needs combating. It was also reported that Islamists were threatening Christians with death.

During 2008, many churches in **Algeria** received the order to close their doors. At least ten Christians were questioned and several of them received suspended jail sentences and fines. This way the authorities try to pressure Christians to return to Islam. Christian leaders believe that the

¹ More information from page 11 onwards

increased persecution comes less because Islamists are growing in power than because Christian converts are increasing in number.

At first, we believed the 2007 trends for religious persecution would remain the same this year in **India**. But the third quarter of 2008 has been one of the worst times of religious violence on record for Christians in India. The number of incidents regarding arrests, physical harassment, abductions and church attacks remained high all over India.

Repeated outbreaks of religious violence in **North Nigeria** have erupted the past year, and more than 100 Christians were killed and injured. The destruction of many churches and kidnapping of believers also continued throughout the year. A sad culminating point was the communal violence after the elections in Jos in November in which many Christians and Muslims died and were injured.

The position of Christians in **Indonesia** is coming under increasing pressure, due to Islamisation and growing polarisation. The deterioration in religious freedom was seen in raided villages, killing of Christians, church closures and the relocation of students.

Unlike 2007, one believer was killed in **Bangladesh** in February this year. A Christian girl was kidnapped and repeatedly raped. In general, pressure on converts increased in Bangladesh – both from Muslims and Buddhists. These are the main reasons for the increased persecution score for Bangladesh this year.

A new religious law is currently up for review before the Constitutional Council of **Kazakhstan**. If implemented, the new law will allow restrictions on the freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Christians in the country are concerned about the new conditions this law mentions concerning Christian activities and meeting places. Local officials already encourage average citizens to have a negative attitude towards Christians, especially next to the border with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The government also tried to close places of worship.

Changes for the Better – Summary²

The total number of points decreased for Bhutan, China, Turkmenistan, Vietnam, Azerbaijan, Sudan (North), Zanzibar Islands, Cuba, Turkey, and Colombia, most of them considerably.

Persecution in Bhutan mainly comes from the family, the community, and the monks who yield a strong influence in the society. Cases of atrocities (i.e. beatings) have been decreasing in number. 2008 was a year of major changes in Bhutan, among others a new constitution which guarantees more religious liberty was implemented.

There was still a lot of pressure on Christians in China in 2008. The government shut down house churches, arrested and physically harmed Christians. On the other hand, the situation in 2008 for Christians was better. There were no reports of Christians being kidnapped or murdered because of their faith, which happened in 2007.

There is a small improvement in Turkmenistan compared to last year. This improvement resulted from fewer reported incidents against Christians. In 2008, the number of Christians arrested,

² More information from page 14 onwards

sentenced to jail, labour camp or psychiatric hospital decreased. The overall situation of Christians in Turkmenistan has not drastically changed.

Fewer believers were harassed in Vietnam this year. Believers also encountered less discrimination at school and at work. Overall, we have the impression that the improvements reported last year continue to exist, but did not further expand this year.

The situation in Azerbaijan for Christians is more or less the same compared to last year. There is a decrease in the total number of points because no people have been sentenced to prison/labour camp and there were fewer arrests of Christians. However, raids upon gatherings continued as well as Christians being discriminated at work because of their faith.

The level of persecution of Christians in North Sudan decreased during the past year. Our local co-workers suppose that one of the reasons for this development is political in nature. Moreover in 2008 there were no reports of Christians being murdered, or kidnapped for their faith. No churches were attacked in 2008. However, Muslims who showed interest in (converting to) Christianity were strongly pressured by society to recant.

On Zanzibar Islands there was somewhat more freedom for the church in 2008 compared to 2007. We received no reports of Christians being sentenced to jail, kidnapped or physically harmed for their faith, nor were churches attacked. The church in general on Zanzibar Islands faces severe difficulties in areas like registration of churches, purchase of property, education, and employment.






It seems like the worst of religious persecution is a thing of the past in Cuba. We received fewer reports on attacks and discrimination. Yet the subtle forms of 'persecution' like social control and surveillance continue.

There have been no big changes or structural improvements in Turkey. Public opinion is extremely chauvinistic. The fact that Turkey lost a few points this year is only due to the fact that in 2008 no Christians were murdered or jailed.

Persecution in Colombia remains fluid. As guerrilla groups move into different areas and take control, the degree of persecution of Christians varies by the perception of the guerrilla commanders about the influence of the church. We recorded fewer reports on persecution of Christians from Colombia this year. As a result this long-time WWL country has therefore disappeared from the list.

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Country Name	Jan. 2009	Jan. 2008	Trend	Variation
1. Korea, North	90,5	90,5	0	0,0
2. Saudi Arabia	67,0	64,5	-	0,0
3. Iran	67,0	64,0	-	0,0
4. Afghanistan	63,0	57,5	-	0,0
5. Somalia	60,5	54,5	-	2,0
6. Maldives	60,0	61,0	0	0,0
7. Yemen	57,5	57,5	0	5,0
8. Laos	55,0	56,5	0	0,0
9. Eritrea	55,0	55,0	0	7,5
10. Uzbekistan	54,5	55,0	0	0,0
11. Bhutan	53,5	58,0	+	0,0
12. China	52,0	55,0	+	0,0
13. Pakistan	51,0	48,0	-	0,0
14. Turkmenistan	50,0	54,0	+	0,0
15. Comoros	50,0	50,0	0	0,0
16. Iraq	49,0	42,5	-	0,0
17. Qatar	48,0	47,5	0	0,0
18. Mauritania ³	48,0	42,5	-	0,0
19. Algeria	46,5	37,5	-	0,0
20. Chechnya	46,0	46,0	0	1,5
21. Egypt	45,5	46,0	0	0,0
22. India	45,0	37,5	-	0,0
23. Vietnam	42,5	46,0	+	0,0
24. Burma/Myanmar	41,5	42,0	0	0,0
25. Libya	41,0	42,5	0	0,0
26. Nigeria (North)	41,0	37,0	-	0,0
27. Azerbaijan	39,5	42,5	+	0,0
28. Oman	39,5	41,0	0	6,0
29. Brunei	38,5	39,0	0	1,5
30. Sudan (North)	36,5	41,5	+	0,0
31. Zanzibar Islands	36,0	43,0	+	0,0
32. Kuwait	36,0	36,0	0	0,0
33. Cuba	35,5	40,0	+	0,0
34. Tajikistan	35,0	34,5	0	0,0
35. United Arab Emirates	35,0	34,0	0	6,0
36. Sri Lanka	34,5	35,5	0	0,0
37. Jordan	34,5	34,0	0	0,0
38. Djibouti	34,0	36,0	0	0,0
39. Turkey	33,0	36,0	+	0,0
40. Morocco	32,5	33,0	0	1,5
41. Indonesia	30,5	26,0	-	0,0
42. Palestinian Territory	29,5	29,5	0	1,5
43. Bangladesh	29,0	26,0	-	0,0
44. Belarus	28,0	30,0	0	5,0
45. Ethiopia	28,0	28,0	0	5,0
46. Syria	28,0	27,5	0	0,0
47. Tunisia	26,5	26,5	0	0,0
48. Bahrain	26,0	27,5	0	1,5
49. Kenya (North East)	24,5	26,0	0	0,0
50. Kazakhstan ⁴	22,0	18,5	-	0,0

	Severe persecution
	Oppression
	Severe limitations
	Some limitations
	Some problems

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³ More information was received on this country causing the difference in points see explanation from page 11 onwards

⁴ Kazakhstan is new on the list, see explanation on page 13

Focus on the Top Ten

1. North Korea

North Korea tops the World Watch List for the seventh time in a row. Daily life for Christians in the country remains extremely harsh. The border between China and North Korea is almost closed; everything and everyone going in and out of North Korea is strictly checked. As usual executions occurred in secret. The number of people sentenced to labour camp or prison has increased compared to last year. North Korea is closing its doors and Christians are persecuted constantly. They suffer immensely as it is not allowed to be a Christian in North Korea. Genuine religious freedom does not exist at all. The constitution is firmly based on Juche ideology. The North Korean regime believes that it will collapse if it fails to stop the spreading of Christianity.

2. Saudi Arabia

In Sharia-ruled Saudi Arabia, the deplorable state of religious freedom remained generally unaltered in 2008. We received more information on incidents against Christians, which led to an increase in points. Under the kingdom's strict interpretation of Islamic law, apostasy (conversion to another religion) is punishable by death if the accused does not recant. For believers from a Muslim background, there is also a great risk of honour killing if their family or social environment discovers their new faith. During 2008 there was one confirmed report of honour killing of a convert to Christianity within a family. Public non-Muslim worship is prohibited in Saudi Arabia. Non-Muslim worshippers who engage in such activities risk arrest, imprisonment, lashing, deportation, and sometimes torture. During the reporting period, we received more reports of Christians arrested for their involvement in religious activities than during the previous year.

3. Iran

This year, Iran and Saudi Arabia have the same total of points. Since Saudi Arabia had higher points last year, it is put on 2 and Iran on 3. The reason for the increase in points for Iran is due to some dramatic developments for Christians during 2008. A major crackdown on house churches occurred during the past year, marking 2008 as one of the toughest years regarding Christian persecution since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In total we recorded more than 50 Christians arrested for their faith in one of the world's most repressive societies. A Christian couple died after interrogation by government officials, due to injuries and stress caused during captivity. Islam is the official religion in Iran, and all laws and regulations must be consistent with the official interpretation of Sharia law. Although Christians are a recognized religious minority who are guaranteed religious freedom, they have reported imprisonment, physical abuse, harassment and discrimination because of their faith. Under the judicial interpretations of Sharia law, any Muslim who leaves Islam to embrace another religion faces the death penalty. However, last September the Iranian Parliament has also called for the Penal Code to be revised, making apostasy punishable by death only. Formerly, the court could also hand down a jail term or hard labour as alternatives. Armenian and Assyrian churches are allowed to teach fellow countrymen in their own language, but it is forbidden to minister to people with a Muslim background (speaking Farsi). Many church services are being monitored by the secret police. Believers that are active in churches or the cell group movement are being pressured. They are questioned, arrested and put in jail and beaten. Individual believers are being oppressed by society, under pressure of the authorities. They have difficulty in finding and keeping a job and are easily fired when it becomes known they are Christian.

4. Afghanistan

The general situation in Afghanistan remains difficult for Christians (and non-Christians alike for that matter). For most to survive from day to day is a struggle. Pressure from the Taliban movement has increased during 2008 and the situation in the country is tense. Everyone who operates outside the social norm faces pressure. There is no visible church in the country and it is nearly impossible to be active as a church in Afghanistan. It remains difficult for Christians to live in an Islamic republic. The constitution states that Islam is the "religion of the state" and that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam." Christians have no right in the country and the attitude of officials toward Christians is negative. Christians face persecution from the government when they know that they are followers of Christ. But most pressure comes from within the family and social network of the believer. Local believers have faced rejection and persecution from their families due to their new-found faith. Christians have been expelled from their homes after making their new faith in Christ known to their families. Also repeated verbal abuse and intimidation, beatings, loss of employment, imprisonment, and sometimes even death is the harsh reality. For Christian NGOs, it has become more difficult to work inside the country and security is of primary concern. Kidnappings of aid workers have greatly increased. A Christian aid worker in the capital Kabul was killed because, according to the Taliban, she was spreading Christianity in Afghanistan which is prohibited by law in the country. In spite of all the problems, the Afghan church continues to grow in all segments of society.

5. Somalia

During 2008, a considerable deterioration of religious freedom occurred in Somalia. Islamist insurgents regained control of most of south-central Somalia, except for Mogadishu, from government and Ethiopian forces. The Transitional Government was on the verge of collapse and the Djibouti-based Alliance for the Reliberation of Somalia (ARS) opposition has negotiated the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops in 2009. The fighting between Somali Islamic militias and Ethiopian forces reportedly led to an increase in hostility towards Christians in several parts of the war torn East African country. Four Christian teachers, two of them converts from Islam, were murdered by Islamic militants in south-central Somalia. In total, we received reports of at least ten Christians being killed for their faith in 2008 and several others kidnapped and raped. Somalia has no constitution or any legal provision for the protection of religious freedom. 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. A very tiny minority of ethnic Somalis are Christian, practicing their faith in secret and living under extremely dangerous conditions.

6. 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. Prohibiting the practice of any other religion than Islam 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 church, though foreigners are allowed to practice their religion in private as individuals. Gathering for Christian worship among foreigners is also prohibited, and foreigners are not allowed to encourage citizens to participate in worship. 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 of indigenous believers, and they live their faith in complete secrecy because of the omnipresent social control by other Maldivians. There was almost no improvement in religious liberty in 2008, despite the fact

that a new constitution was implemented and the country elected a new president, Mr. Nasheed. There were no reports this year about indigenous believers who were arrested or of expatriate Christians deported from the country.

7. 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 to Christianity (or other religions). Converts from Islamic background may face the death penalty if their new faith is discovered. Proselytizing of Muslims is prohibited. Converts from Islam encounter opposition from the authorities and also extremist groups, who threaten "apostates" with death if they do not revert to Islam. During the past year, several Christian converts were arrested, physically harmed and threatened for their faith. There was no major change in the lack of religious freedom for Christians in Yemen in 2008.

8. Laos

The church is relatively small but continues to grow (about 200,000 believers, who mostly belong to ethnic minorities). There was hardly any improvement in religious liberty in 2008 in the country. The Laotian authorities allow limited presence of Christianity and put believers under strict surveillance. From time to time believers are arrested, many of whom experience extreme physical and emotional pressure (torture) to renounce their (new) faith. 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 and the negative perception of the government on Christianity (The Church) as agents for the USA to bring political change in Laos towards 'democracy'. The Christians' patriotism is questioned. They are being accused of not being good citizens. In one incident, some Christians were caught with an anti-government organization clamouring for an independent state with full autonomy. But still there are many unregistered activities and the church seems to be growing despite persecution. In February 2008, 58 believers were arrested in two villages in Bokeo province. In March, eight pastors were arrested on the border as they were on their way to a training session in Thailand. In July there were large-scale raids in Boukham and Katin villages in which at least 80 believers were arrested. Though most of those arrested have been released, an unknown number are still in jail.

9. Eritrea

Eritrea is new in the top ten of the World Watch List. Although the tiny Horn of Africa country rose mainly due to the fall in points of other countries, the deplorable situation of Christians very much justifies a position in the top ten. The Eritrean government severely restricts freedom of religion for unregistered groups and violates the rights of some registered groups. Since May 2004, the only authorized religions recognized by the state are Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran and Islam. Anyone caught worshipping outside the four recognized religious institutions, even in private homes, has been subjected to arrest, torture and severe pressure to deny his or her faith. The already lamentable situation of Christians worsened further in 2008. For years it was reported that more than 2,000 Christians had been detained under harsh conditions. However, church leaders in Eritrea told Open Doors recently that almost 3,000 Christians had been incarcerated for their faith by mid-December. A campaign of mass arrests all over the country was initiated at the end October. Hundreds of evangelical Christians, including women and children from a variety of underground churches, were arrested. Several Christians were released on bail

during the past year but many, including pastors and priests from both Protestant and Orthodox churches, remain under arrest in police stations, military camps, metal shipping containers and jails all across Eritrea. None of the prisoners has been charged officially or given access to judicial process. In many cases, police authorities are subjecting the detained Christians to beatings and other physical mistreatment. We received reports that in 2008 three Christians died as a result of the poor conditions in prison and from extensive torture.

10. Uzbekistan

The situation for Christians in Uzbekistan remained poor during 2008. The constitution provides for freedom of religion, but the government and laws restricted these rights in practice. Activities such as proselytizing, importing religious literature, and offering private religious instruction are forbidden or restricted in the law. In 2008 no new registrations have been issued; many churches had to go underground. In May a TV program was broadcast several times, Named "In the claws of ignorance", Christians were portrayed extremely negatively in the program. Media campaigns against Christians were more frequent and fiercer. In 2008 Christians were kept in detention for a day or longer and then fined. Christians do not only face persecution from the government but also from Muslim family members, who can put much pressure on new Christians. Christians have been cut off from water supplies and/or electricity to force them out of the village or to make them renounce their faith. Christian families have been threatened, and then they move from one Mahalla (district) to another. Christians are forced to leave their houses because of threats from the Mahalla committees.

Countries Where the Situation Deteriorated

Apart from Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan and Somalia, the situation for Christians deteriorated in Pakistan, Iraq, Mauritania, Algeria, India, Nigeria (North), Indonesia, Bangladesh and Kazakhstan.

13. Pakistan

Pressure on the Christian minority in **Pakistan** continues unabated, but we received more concrete figures on specifics. The number of killings remains at about one per month. The same figure can be quoted for those arrested (mostly on blasphemy charges). Kidnapping and physical harassment occur even more frequently. Attacks on property of Christians and churches occur almost every week. Discrimination at all levels of society is a daily affair. Pressure from society will almost always result in preventing church construction. A new church must be a certain distance from a mosque, medressa or Muslim cemetery. So if a church is planned in a spot that meets those requirements, a (temporary) mosque is erected first. There is no need for permission for them. The improved statistics and the restrictions in church building are the main causes of the deterioration of Pakistan's score.

16. Iraq

After a short period of fragile peace at the end of 2007, Iraq's Christian minority was faced with a year full of violence in 2008. The year started with a series of bomb blasts, damaging in total seven Iraqi churches and three convents. Also during the rest of the year, churches were attacked or damaged by bombs. More violence than ever before was specifically directed at Christians because of their faith. Extremists used death threats to force Christians out of entire quarters in Mosul and Baghdad, in what seems to be a religious cleansing campaign. Christians also suffer

from the anti-Western atmosphere in the country. Many Iraqis see the West as Christian, so they jump to the conclusion that when you are Christian, you are a collaborator. Having 'Christianity' on your ID is sufficient to get you killed. Other motives, especially when targeting Christians in kidnappings, are financial, since many Iraqi Christians are part of the middle class. In 2008, several Christians were murdered, abused and/or kidnapped. No less than five Christians were reported kidnapped and we have recorded at least 35 Christians who were killed for their faith during the past year. However the actual number could be much higher. The violence has caused hundreds of thousands of Iraqi people, both Muslim and Christian, to leave the country, and many are displaced inside Iraq, particularly in Kurdistan.

18. Mauritania

The Islamic republic of Mauritania recognizes Islam as the official religion of its citizens. The government limits freedom of religion partly by restricting the evangelization of Muslims and the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials, though private ownership of these materials is not prohibited. There is no freedom for conversion to a religion other than Islam. The sentence for apostasy is death -- although this sentence has (formally) not been carried out in recent years. Like the previous year, the total points for Mauritania increased considerably in 2008. We received more information on this country in 2008 which indicated that the situation for Christians is even worse than previously expected. This does not mean that the situation worsened during the past year. According to our regional co-workers, there was no change in the trend toward Christian persecution. On the other hand, there were a few alarming developments during the past year. The Mauritanian media are portraying Christianity as a wicked movement that needs to be attacked. Moreover an increase in activity of Islamist groups like Al Qaeda was observed, which led to mounting fear especially among Christians. It was also reported that Islamists were threatening Christians with death.

19. Algeria

In Algeria a law approved in 2006 and put into full effect in 2008. The law prohibited efforts to convert Muslims to another religion and gave the government the right to regulate every aspect of Christian practice.. Since almost all Algerian Christians are converts from Islam, the new law could be understood to make nearly all Christian churches in the country unlawful. During 2008, 26 churches received the order to close their doors. At least ten Christians were arrested (most in possession of Christian books or Bibles) and questioned and several of them received suspended jail sentences and fines. In this way, the authorities try to pressure Christians to return to Islam. Christian leaders believe that the increase in persecution is not primarily the result of Islamists growing in power, but mainly the result of the growing number of Christian converts. Especially during the first six months of the year, there was an intense media campaign against the church, with major Algerian newspapers carrying articles expressing concern about the growth of the church. The government crackdown seems to have eased off during the second part of the year.

22. India

At first, we believed the trends of 2007 would continue this year in India. But then came the third quarter and intense violence broke out in Orissa. Hindu extremists reacted fiercely to the murder of one of their leaders on 23 August, and in a wave of violence that lasted many weeks, more than 110 believers were killed (some sources even claim that more than 500 Christians were killed), more than 170 churches were destroyed, more than 4,500 Christian homes were destroyed, and more than 54,000 people were displaced (more than 10,000 Christians are still living in refugee camps). In all, the third quarter of 2008 has been one of the worst on record for Christians in India.

For the rest, the number of incidents regarding arrests, physical harassment, abductions and church attacks remained high all over India, but with concentrations in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa and Uttarakhand. Apart from Orissa, Christians were killed in Andhra Pradesh (2), Kerala (1), Madhya Pradesh (1), Maharashtra (1), Tamil Nadu (2) and Uttarakhand (2).

26. Nigeria (North)

Twelve northern Nigerian states have imposed Islamic law in the past eight years. Repeated outbreaks of religious violence have erupted ever since, claiming thousands of lives. Muslims accusing Christians of blasphemy led to violence in the Sharia states of Bauchi and Kano in February. We reported five Christians killed, about 20 injured, thousands displaced and several churches destroyed in attacks by Muslims in these states in 2008. Muslim leaders in Kano state have called for a national law against "blasphemy," arousing fear among Christians that they could be put to death arbitrarily. More than 20 Christian girls were kidnapped in Bauchi, Katsina, Kano, Niger and Yobe states. Many of them were abducted with the aim of Islamizing them. At the end of November communal violence broke out in the central Nigerian city of Jos. Police and troops killed about 400 rampaging Muslims, and Islamists put to death about 100 Christians. Six pastors were left dead, 40 churches destroyed and 369 Christians sustained serious injuries. Ethnic and religious tensions were apparently triggered by Muslim suspicion of electoral fraud.

41. Indonesia

Over the past years, many experts have warned that a creeping Islamisation and growing polarisation is occurring in Indonesia. The position of Christians is coming under increasing pressure. In May and December 2008, two predominantly Christian villages were raided resulting in the brutal killing of three believers and the displacement of thousands. In July, all 1,500 students of SETIA were forcibly relocated after riots in Jakarta. In 2008, over 30 churches were closed. These are the main factors for the deterioration of religious freedom in the country.

43. Bangladesh

Unlike 2007, one believer was killed in Bangladesh in February this year. In May 2008, Elina Das, the 13-year-old daughter of a pastor was kidnapped and repeatedly raped. In general, pressure on converts increased in Bangladesh – both from Muslims and Buddhists. These are the main reasons for the increased persecution score for Bangladesh this year.

50. Kazakhstan

A new religious law has already passed the houses of parliament in 2008, but the president sent the law to the Constitutional Council for review. If implemented, the new law will allow the government to restrict the freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Christians in the country are concerned about new conditions for registration, restrictions on missionary activities, restrictions on smaller religious groups, restrictions on building places of worship, compulsory censorship of imported religious literature and it will be more difficult for children to be involved in religious youth events. There are already cases of violations of the rights of Christians especially along western borders and generally in the western area of the country.

Officials anticipate and feel the breath of coming changes in the law about religion. The farther away from the capital, the more openly they announce to believers that their time is going to be over soon. Local officials encourage average citizens to have a negative attitude toward Christians, especially next to the border with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The government also tried to close places of worship.

Countries Where the Situation Improved

The number of points decreased considerably for Bhutan, China, Turkmenistan, Vietnam, Azerbaijan, Sudan (North), Zanzibar Islands, Cuba, Turkey and Colombia. For China, Turkmenistan, Vietnam, Azerbaijan, Cuba, Turkey and Colombia, the decrease in points was merely the result of less severe or fewer incidents against Christians during the past year.

11. Bhutan

Officially, the Christian faith does not exist in Bhutan and Christians are not allowed to pray or celebrate in public. Openly, Christians can meet as a family but not collectively with other Christian families. Religious workers are denied visas to enter the country. Christian children are accepted in schools, but some face discrimination if known to be a Christian and they face the constant pressure to attend Buddhist religious festivals. It is almost impossible for Christian students to get to university level. For Christians with government jobs, discrimination is also an issue. There have been cases of believers being deprived of promotion simply because of their faith. The import of printed religious matter is banned, and only Buddhist religious texts are allowed in the country. Persecution mainly comes from the family, the community, and the monks who yield a strong influence in the society. Cases of atrocities (i.e. beatings) are sporadic. 2008 was a year of major changes in Bhutan: the first-ever elections for parliament were held; a new constitution which guarantees more religious liberty was implemented and a new king was crowned.

12. China

China remains a country with a lot of contradictions. The situation in 2008 was more tense than in 2007. Border controls were very tight during the Olympic period. The visas of many foreigners (especially with missionary background) were not renewed after expiry and they were forced to go back to their home country. China has a large church and there are many differences between the cities and the countryside. In the past year the government shut down house churches, arrested and physically harmed Christians. There was still a lot of pressure on Christians in 2008. But on the other hand, the situation in 2008 for Christians was better. There were no reports of Christians who were murdered because of their faith and there was also no information of people who were kidnapped, as happened in 2007.

14. Turkmenistan

There is a small improvement compared to last year. This improvement resulted from fewer reported incidents against Christians. In 2008, the number of Christians who were arrested because of their faith, who were sentenced to jail, labour camp or psychiatric hospital, was lower than in 2007. . However, the overall situation of Christians in Turkmenistan has not drastically changed. In smaller towns and villages, some of the Christian leaders have to report weekly to the police station for a 'chat'. They are not kept at the station, but are allowed to leave the same day. The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, in practice the government restricts these rights.

23. Vietnam

Fewer believers were harassed in Vietnam this year. Believers also encountered less discrimination at school and at work. Overall, we have the impression that the improvements reported last year continue to exist, but did not further expand this year. There seems to be an unwritten border that the state will not allow to be crossed. When Catholic believers tested how far they could go by protesting 1954 and 1975 church property confiscations, the state showed its iron fist again.

27. Azerbaijan

The situation in Azerbaijan for Christians is more or less the same compared to last year. There is a decrease in the total number of points because no people have been sentenced to prison/labour camp and there were fewer arrests of Christians. However, this does not mean the situation for Christians in Azerbaijan is totally positive. The number of raids upon unregistered Baptist, Pentecostal churches and on Adventists increased. Also Christians are being discriminated at work because of their faith. There is a difference between urban and rural areas. In the capital Baku, harassments from the government are not as acute as in the remote districts.

30. Sudan (North)

The level of persecution of Christians in North Sudan decreased during the past year. Our local co-workers suppose that one of the reasons for this development is political in nature. Sudan is heading for elections in 2009 and it is assumed that the ruling National Congress party aims to attract votes by creating a positive policy toward all people and relaxing of restrictions on Christians in the north. Another reason for the fall in total points is that compared to 2007, there were no reports of Christians being murdered or kidnapped for their faith. No churches were attacked in 2008. However, Muslims in the north who showed interest in Christianity were strongly pressured by society to recant.

31. Zanzibar Islands

There was somewhat more freedom for the church in 2008 compared to 2007. Contrary to 2007, we received no reports of Christians being sentenced to jail, kidnapped or physically harmed for their faith, nor were churches attacked. The Zanzibar Islands are part of Tanzania. Whereas mainland Tanzania is predominantly Christian and its constitution provides for freedom of religion, 97 percent of the population of the Zanzibar Islands is Muslim, with a very active extremist element. Zanzibar Islands have their own government and operate autonomously although they are represented in the Tanzanian parliament. The Zanzibar Archipelago is made up of three islands: Unguja (the main island), Tumbatu and Pemba Islands. The church in general on Zanzibar Islands faces struggles in areas like registration of churches, purchase of property, education, and employment.

33. Cuba

It seems like the worst of religious persecution is a thing of the past in Cuba. We received fewer reports on physical attacks on believers and churches, and discrimination of believers at school and work decreased. Yet the subtle forms of 'persecution' like social control and surveillance continue. Christians may still not speak out on politics and human rights. All denominations are experiencing growth in the number of believers and churches, which results in huge needs for the church.

39. Turkey

There have been no big changes in Turkey. Public opinion is extremely prejudiced. A good Turkish citizen is Muslim and speaks Turkish; any deviation from this is treated with hostility, and accusations of insulting Turkishness (an offense under Turkish law) are readily made. This has far-reaching consequences for ethnic and religious minorities – they are hard-pressed and put under limitations. The fact that Turkey lost a few points this year is only due to the fact that in 2008 no Christians were murdered or jailed; certainly there were no structural improvements.

Colombia

Persecution in Colombia remains fluid. As guerrilla groups move into different areas and take control, the degree of persecution of Christians varies by the perception of the guerrilla commanders about the influence of the church. Some allow the churches to operate, some restrict their operation and some outlaw them, so that pastors, church leaders and members are marked for dire consequences if they persist. We recorded fewer reports on persecution of Christians from Colombia this year. As a result this long-time WWL country has therefore disappeared from the list.