

Persecuted and Forgotten?

Executive Summary

Down narrow alleys flanked on either side by simple brick dwellings, the sound of grief could be heard. Women swathed in black screamed. In between their cries could be heard the sobbing of the men. Nobody could quite believe such a tragedy could befall their tight-knit farming community. El-Aour, a mostly Christian village in the Minya governorate in Egypt, was hardest hit by one of the worst acts of hatred against Christians in modern times. Islamist terror group Daesh (ISIS) released a video of the beheading of 20 Egyptian Coptic Christian migrant workers kidnapped in Libya. 13 of the 20 Coptic men shown in orange jump suits kneeling in front of their killers came from El-Aour. When their families back home saw the video released on 12th February 2015, they were horror-struck. Bushra Fawzi spotted his son, Shenouda, among those kneeling on the Libyan seashore. Bushra said: “He is my first and eldest son, my first joy and happiness. I want his body back. If they dumped it in the sea, I want it back. If they set fire to it, I want its dust.”¹

It is for Shenouda, his family and countless others that Aid to the Church in Need, the Catholic charity for suffering Christians, has produced the 2015 edition of *Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith*.

The full report, which is available at www.acnuk.org/persecution, shows that the period under review – October 2013 to July 2015 – has been catastrophic for many Christians in the regions where persecution is worst. They are not the only ones to have suffered, nor have they necessarily fallen victim to the single worst acts of persecution, but taken as a whole more Christians have been targeted than any other religious group. Worse still, the impact of this deepening cycle of persecution has created the most significant exodus of Christian faithful in the religion’s history.

Persecution has emerged as a key factor in a global upsurge of forcibly displaced people. The numbers of internally displaced people and refugees abroad hit an all-time record high² of nearly 60 million in 2014, according to the UN.³ With people fleeing their homes as never before, Christians are fast disappearing from entire regions – most notably a huge chunk of the Middle East but also whole dioceses in Africa. In large part, this migration is the product of an ethnic cleansing motivated by religious hatred. This systematic violence and intimidation is to a large degree the work of militant Islamists – terror groups which have apparently appeared out of nowhere and exercise a potency and a cruelty far greater than that of the radical organisations from which they have sprung.

Daesh and other movements have acted strategically to instil a fear of genocide, a threat made real by the massacre of specific Christian groups. Such savage acts, captured on video, and broadcast to the world, have been proof enough of the Islamists’ intent to force Christians out of regions which have fallen to the extremists. Be it in Syria, Iraq, Nigeria or parts of east Africa, the growing threat of militant Muslim groups – notably Daesh – has prompted hundreds of thousands to flee. It is a primary cause in the contraction of Christianity – changing from being a global faith to a regional one, with the faithful increasingly absent from ever-widening areas. This is set in the context of an overall growth in the total Christian population which within a century has nearly quadrupled to more than 2 billion.⁴ The regions the faithful are emigrating from are frequently those where until barely a generation ago Christians were both numerous and influential.

If the situation does not improve, Christianity is on course for extinction in many of its biblical heartlands within a generation, if not before. The prognosis for the Church’s survival in parts of Africa is almost as bad. **It is this theme – religio-ethnic cleansing powered by the well-publicised threat of genocide – that emerges as a predominant finding in this 2015 edition of *Persecuted and Forgotten?***

80 percent of persecution is against Christians

Global statistics regarding persecuted Christians bear out the severity of the violence and oppression directed against them. Even before the reporting period, research had established that Christians were by far the most persecuted faith group. In summer 2012, the International Society for Human Rights, based in Frankfurt, Germany, estimated that 80 percent of all acts of religious discrimination were against Christians.⁵ In terms of outright persecution, the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE), reported that 75 percent was against Christians.⁶

While controversy surrounded reports that up to 150,000 Christians were being killed for their faith every year,⁷ there was a growing consensus that oppression against them had become increasingly severe. At an Easter reception in Downing Street in April 2014, British Prime Minister David Cameron stated that Christianity "is now the most persecuted religion around the world,"⁸ echoing statements in November 2012 by Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel.⁹

Growing establishment recognition of the scale of persecution was reinforced by events during the reporting period, notably attacks on Christians by Daesh. In November 2014, at the UK launch of Aid to the Church in Need's Religious Freedom in the World Report, HRH The Prince of Wales gave a video message stating: "The horrendous and heart-breaking events in Iraq and Syria have brought the subject of religious freedom and persecution to the forefront of the world news."¹⁰

Research methodology – separating facts from conjecture

This report – *Persecuted and Forgotten?* – assesses both the nature of the threats to Christians and the underlying causes. It identifies trends and, where possible, predicts future developments. The report assesses the situation in 22 countries. In the majority of cases, the countries are selected as being among the worst perpetrators of hatred against Christians: North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Eritrea, Pakistan and Sudan are among those worth highlighting in this context. But the report also examines other countries where oppression of Christians is less severe. These countries, notably Russia, are assessed in the light of their political and wider cultural significance; their governments' approach to religious freedom in general and Christians in particular has a regional and even global impact.

Selective rather than comprehensive, the reports for each country under review are broken down into two parts. First, there is an analysis of the key facts and figures which form the essential background to any assessment of religious freedom. This overview of political (constitutional), economic and cultural phenomena provides the foundation of an assessment of the all-important indicators of change and continuity which are the ultimate focus of the report. This analysis is followed by incident reports. Varying considerably in detail and quantity, these reports provide noteworthy persecution case studies. The criteria for selection include any individual or group suffering harassment, oppression or worse in ways that impact upon their access to religious freedom. Incident reports cover all mainstream Christian groups – Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant – but avoid coverage of religious groups who, though nominally Christian, either excessively focus on materialism by preaching a 'Prosperity Gospel', or whose concept of the Christian faith is divorced from mainstream beliefs.

The majority of incident reports are provided by sources other than ACN; indeed the charity must acknowledge a debt of gratitude to other Christian charities and to media organisations both religious (mostly Christian) and secular. The authors of *Persecuted and Forgotten?* have paid close attention to selecting only reputable sources and, where possible, have corroborated their evidence against specialist knowledge by country experts within the charity itself and from material collected on ACN fact-finding trips to countries. In many of the countries under review, specific, sensitive information has been withheld for the precise reason that it may put Christians – and others – at risk of harm. Hence, some of the conclusions drawn go further than indicated by the evidence that is presented.

This careful and thorough-going research, building on methods developed over five editions of *Persecuted and Forgotten?* spanning nine years, shows that **the situation has deteriorated in the**

overwhelming majority of the countries under review. Even in the period since the last report was produced, in October 2013, the position of Christians has declined – in many cases dramatically.

Analysing the research findings in the 22 countries in question, ACN compared religious issues facing Christians over the period 2013–15 with those in 2011–13. These factors of concern include:

- Violence against Christians – attacks on churches and Christians’ homes and businesses, kidnapping of believers for reasons connected to their faith or religious identity;
- Court cases involving Christians who suffer persecution through unjust legal processes. A key concern here are Blasphemy Laws;
- Political developments hindering or advancing the cause of Christians’ access to religious freedom, notably new or amended constitutions, government statements and policies – travel permits for clergy, planning regulations regarding church building projects, government attitudes to Christian engagement in political debate and voting rights;
- Tracking social changes affecting Christians – access to employment, education and healthcare, where social stigmatisation has had the effect of making it impossible for Christians to claim their rights in spite of entitlement under the law.

Taken as a whole, however, the comparative evaluation does not aim for complete comprehensiveness. ACN’s essentially qualitative assessment, by its nature, does not provide statistics to facilitate a full comparative analysis. Also state oppression is entirely different by nature to sporadic acts of violence – and conditions of persecution are invariably not uniform across any one particular country.

Persecuted and Forgotten? The principal findings

It is in this context that, in a disturbingly high number of the countries reviewed, specific groups of Christians have suffered a comprehensive denial of their human rights. The reports describe incidents that rank as crimes against humanity: they include Christians kidnapped and never seen again, others packed into metal containers under the African sun, others again tortured into admitting crimes they never committed and some even hanged or beheaded.¹¹ Modern technology and social media have done much to aid the spread of such information, if not necessarily always achieving accuracy and balance. The violence against Christians in particular, and other faiths in general, was well documented in the years leading up to the period under review of this study. But in key regions, most notably parts of the Middle East, nothing that went before could quite prepare observers of Christian persecution for the calamities that would befall the faithful from October 2013 to June 2015. A table and the accompanying map illustrate the extent to which an already grave situation has manifestly worsened. Given how much persecution had worsened in 2011–13, it is very significant that the rate of decline actually increased in the two years that followed. The 2015 report examined 22 countries, of which 19 were also featured in the 2013 *Persecuted and Forgotten?* report. **Of those 19 countries, 15 (ie 79 percent) saw the situation for Christians “worsen”.** The report of two years ago listed 13 countries which had worsened.¹² In both surveys factors of decline included increased attacks on Christians and churches, legal changes manifestly compromising the freedom of Christians and hate speech, especially in the media. **The number of countries categorised as those where Christians suffered “extreme” persecution rose from six in 2011–13 to 10 in 2013–15. The newcomers to the “extreme” category were Iraq, Nigeria, Sudan and Syria.** These joined the pre-existing line-up of worst offenders – China, Eritrea, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam. Reflecting the increased volatility of the situation in core areas of concern, the research noted a decline in countries where the situation was unchanged, falling from five in 2011–13 to three two years later.

Extremist Islamism – the gravest threat

It is noteworthy that all the countries new to the “extreme” category were ones which saw an upsurge in extremist Islamism. It is important to acknowledge that all faiths and none were targeted to a greater or lesser extent by radical jihadist groups,¹³ notably Daesh. In many cases, the violence should be seen as part of the growing clashes between the Sunni and Shi’a branches of Islam, where Christians were caught in the crossfire, alongside a host of other minority groups. But events showed that Christians were especially at risk, by the sheer number of attacks on churches and the faithful. Of the 13 countries where the situation for Christians worsened, nine saw Islamist anti-Christian violence to the fore – Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan,

Syria. A further two – Eritrea and Turkmenistan – were countries where Totalitarian regimes oppress Christians but also where there were increasing problems from growing Islamism.

The rise of extremist Islamic groups occurred not just in the Middle East, but also in parts of Africa and even on the Indian sub-continent. Of all the reports about Islamist atrocities, the one which had arguably the most impact was the fall of Mosul and the Nineveh plains to Daesh in the summer of 2014. When the Islamist terror group seized Iraq's second city that June, they presented Christians with a choice – either convert to Islam, pay the *Jizya* tax or 'there is nothing... but the sword'¹⁴. When Daesh withdrew the option of paying the *Jizya* tax, almost the entire Christian community fled, leaving nearly all their possessions behind. Hundreds of thousands of others also took flight, the majority of them Muslims.¹⁵ The Christians sought sanctuary in the neighbouring Nineveh plains, only to suffer the same agony again when Daesh invaded many of the towns and villages there. On the night of 6th August, another exodus unfolded, affecting Yizidis as well as Christians. Arriving in Kurdish northern Iraq as morning broke on 7th August were 120,000 Christians – most of them with nothing but the clothes they were wearing.¹⁶

What happened in Mosul and Nineveh may have had extensive media coverage but it was only one among many incidents of violence that pushed Christians to the brink as never before. **Many faith communities suffered but, with numbers already depleted, Christians had most to lose from the massive surge in Islamist violence.** Only just beginning to make its presence felt during the time frame covered in the 2013 *Persecuted and Forgotten?* report, it quickly became clear that Daesh – and other militant Islamic groups – had trumped Al Qaeda as a force of unparalleled violence.¹⁷ Such ruthlessness was matched only by Daesh's ambition as it set out to create a caliphate not only extending across Iraq and Syria but also with a desire to sweep east, perhaps as far as Bangladesh, and west across north Africa and beyond. Indeed by spring 2015, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, described as caliph by his Daesh followers, was reportedly accepting a pledge of allegiance from fellow Islamist terror group Boko Haram, itself rejoicing in its blood-thirsty gains across north-east Nigeria.¹⁸ The reach of Islamist militancy within Africa was highlighted by reports Aid to the Church in Need received from the Democratic Republic of Congo where training camps for up to 1,500 children and teenagers as young as nine were sighted in the summer of 2015.¹⁹

Daesh made no secret of its attempt to eliminate the presence of Christianity in the lands under its control. The militants claimed responsibility for video footage clearly showing churches being ransacked, icons defaced and crosses and bells thrown to the ground and replaced by the Islamists' infamous black flags.²⁰ But it did not end there and graphic images issued via new media showed the savage killing of innocent believers.

Ethnic cleansing prompted by the threat of genocide

In late October 2013, Islamists seized the largely Christian town of Saddam. When the town was liberated 10 days later, returnees discovered 30 bodies in two mass graves.²¹ The message was clear: if Christians – and others holding 'heretical' views – were caught within territory seized by Daesh and other extremist groups, they could expect torture and death. The scale of the threat was recognised by Church leaders. When the Nineveh plains were about to fall to Daesh, the decision by bishops and priests to evacuate the area quickly may well have averted countless deaths. As Daesh seized key parts of Nineveh in August 2014, Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphael I Sako of Baghdad said: "[Christians have] fled their villages and houses. Christians are walking on foot in Iraq's searing summer heat towards [safety]. They are facing catastrophe and a real genocide."²²

Christians fleeing in vast numbers

In this scenario of violence and threats, extremist groups – with substantial military, financial and organisational capacities and subterranean political support – have either swept aside the pre-existing order or drawn it into a bitter fight to the death. Whether caught in the crossfire or victims of religious hatred, Christians have had no option but to flee or die. In many of the countries reviewed in this report the faithful have experienced human rights violations tantamount to full-scale religioethnic cleansing. While it is not true to say that Christians have been killed *en masse*, the violence committed in their homelands in general and in many cases against them in particular – has caused

them to flee in vast numbers. **They have effectively been wiped off the face of the earth not just in specific towns and cities but much further afield too.**

The summer 2014 Daesh capture of Mosul and Nineveh in Iraq prompted a mass exodus of people of various faiths including 120,000 Christians. For the first time in 1,800 years there was no Sunday Mass in Mosul.²³ But there are other examples too. By May 2015, successive acts of violence by Islamist terror group Boko Haram had caused 100,000 Catholics alone to flee Nigeria's largest diocese of Maiduguri in the north-east, with 350 churches destroyed and 22 out of 40 parish centres and chaplaincies deserted.²⁴

Elsewhere in Africa, Islamist violence clearly intended to intimidate Christians, destabilising their presence. In Kenya, Islamists showed the extent of their reach in April 2015 by mounting an attack at Garissa University, singling out and butchering Christians and other non-Muslims.²⁵ In South Sudan, the almost complete evacuation of Christians from the Malakal area in spring 2014 was principally the product of a massive upsurge in sectarian or tribal conflict.²⁶

Extinction within a decade?

But looking longer term, the pattern of events points to a similar process of ethnic cleansing occurring over a much larger geographical area. **The vast exodus of Christians from Syria, Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East highlights the very real possibility that Christianity could soon all but disappear from much of its ancient homeland.** Christians in Iraq fell to as low as 275,000 in the period under review with at least half recently displaced.²⁷ Many, if not most, of those who remain want to leave Iraq. The rate of decline from about one million in 2002–03 to about 700,000 in 2006,²⁸ to below 300,000 today – shows that the Christian population has been haemorrhaging from Iraq at a rate of between 60,000 and 100,000 a year. These statistics suggest that unless there is a change for the better, Christianity will be all but extinct in Iraq within five years. Those who stay may yet find the contraction of the native Christian community and the continuing pressures too much to bear. Up to 50 percent of Christians still in Iraq have been internally displaced within the last 18 months, with the sack of Christian Mosul and Nineveh arguably tearing the heart out of the Church's presence in the country.

Iraq's declining Christian presence is mirrored in Syria, parts of Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa. Such an exodus has profound consequences, reaching far beyond the Christian community. The absence of Christians represents a crucial societal, organisational and cultural rupture with the past. Breaking from a process towards pluralism, this emptying of Christians from regions which had been their home for centuries, is bound to be seen by future historians as a decisive move towards religious totalitarianism. According to this model of society, not only does one religion take centre place but does so to the exclusion of others, crushing dissent underfoot. At the very least the disappearance of Christians – especially in the Middle East – damages the prospects of social cohesion. As HRH The Prince of Wales has said: "The decline of Christians in the [Middle East] represents a major blow to peace as Christians are part of the fabric of society, often acting as bridge builders between other communities. This crucial role throughout Middle East society is one recognised by Muslims (who are not extremist) both Sunni or Shia who attest to the fact that Christians are their friends and that their communities are needed."²⁹

In the face of a profound shift in the power balance in favour of extremist Islam, especially in the Middle East, events in Egypt showed a shift in the opposite direction. The 2011–13 period saw Islamism becoming increasingly institutionalised under President Morsi, and when he was ousted in the summer of 2013, his supporters and other radicals scapegoated Christians, carrying out a wave of attacks on churches.³⁰ The rise to power of former General al-Sisi has apparently put paid to Islamist agendas, e.g. replacing Morsi's pro-*Shari'a* constitution with one – backed in a referendum of January 2014 – giving full civil rights to Christians.³¹ Such a development holds out a potential beacon of hope for Christians and others in the Middle East against a backdrop of growing Islamism.

The threat to Christians from extremist Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism

The period under review also saw a deepening hostility towards Christians from other faith groups. Religions' increasing identification with the nation state to the exclusion of other faith groups often took the form of anti-Christian intolerance. In some countries, Christianity was considered offensive to an increasingly numerous and influential radicalised religious elite who perceived the religion as a threat both because of its faith content and also because of its links with the colonial era.

In India over the October 2013–June 2015 period, radical Hindu movements carried out increased attacks. The violence notably spread from the regions where the Christian presence is weaker to the urban centres, including those where the Church is prominent. Cardinal Telesphore Toppo, Archbishop of Ranchi, received death threats.³² Reports surfaced that the Hindutva movements were banking on the presumption that Hindu nationalist Prime Minister's Narendra Modi's election victory in 2014 meant that the government would turn a blind eye to attacks carried out in the name of the religion most identified with the nation state of India.

Although Buddhism is usually seen as a religion of peace, a more militant strand of the religion has allied itself to nationalists, who regard it as the rightful national religion in Burma and Sri Lanka. Buddhist extremists in Sri Lanka have destroyed or forced the closure of numerous churches – 2014 saw about 60 churches and chapels attacked, which was down from 105 the previous year.³³ The 2014 attacks included one where 11 Buddhist monks led a 250-strong mob against Holy Family Church in Asgiriya, Kandy District, dragging the minister and his wife out of their home and assaulting them.³⁴ In both Sri Lanka and Burma, Muslims and Christians alike have been targeted as deviating from the national socio-religious norm. The Burmese military continued its campaign of repression against Christian ethnic minorities in Chin and Karen States in the north, during which Christian places of worship have been singled out for destruction, when nearby Buddhist temples went unharmed. In Chin state, Buddhist monks have been given land confiscated from local Christians and erected monasteries and pagodas on the sites. It seems that aspirational nationalist models are crossing boundaries, and paradoxically even religious divides. Dilantha Withanage, chief executive of Sri Lanka's extremist *Bodu Bala Sena* movement, expressed admiration for India's Hindutva Prime Minister Narendra Modi, saying: "There are lots of similarities between India and Sri Lanka... So Modi and his party is a great inspiration for us."³⁵ That a nationalist movement seeking to enshrine Buddhism can look to another which identifies with Hinduism, points to the emergence of a more nuanced and complex model of nationalism in the region.

In Israel, the only country in the Middle East with a notably expanding Christian population, attacks on Church sites increased in number and ferocity. When extremist Jewish militants were accused of an arson attack on Galilee's Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves in June 2015, Church leaders said it was part of an emerging pattern of attacks both in Galilee and elsewhere.³⁶ Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's March 2015 election victory and his coalition with a hard-line Jewish political group increased fears that the interests of Christians would not be protected, despite reassurances to the contrary from the highest levels of government.

Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes – suffocation, repression and intolerance

The evidence suggests that **the situation for Christians has worsened in a number of communist and other countries with an authoritarian bent.** North Korea carried out a fresh campaign of violence and other intimidation against the faithful as part of a clampdown on perceived dissent against the 'juche' isolationist regime and the pseudo-religious ideology surrounding the Kim dynasty.³⁷ The killing of 33 Christians, who were accused of being spies, shed fresh light on the regime's antipathy towards the faith group.³⁸ As UK Parliamentarian Lord Alton has pointed out, the regime is keenly aware that Christians played a key role "in ending the military dictatorship" in neighbouring South Korea.³⁹ At least 10 percent of North Korea's estimated 400,000–500,000 Christians are detained in labour camps.⁴⁰ Prisoners in the camps are subject to torture, murder,

rape, medical experimentation, forced labour, forced abortion and execution. Religious detainees routinely receive harsher treatment.⁴¹

Similar persecution was noted in Eritrea where former prisoners have described physical abuse.⁴² Reportedly, up to 3,000 Eritreans – the majority of them Christian – are currently imprisoned for their religious beliefs. Church-state relations were soured by the regime's angry response to the Catholic bishops' June 2014 pastoral letter which said government policies were partly responsible for prompting mass emigration.⁴³

While there is latitude for worship in China and Vietnam, this is strictly controlled by the state, with severe sanctions for believers not worshipping in accordance with the state's strictures. Vietnam's Decree 92 has further restricted religious freedom, requiring groups to obtain permission for "religious meetings" and stipulating that priests undergo education programmes, and submit formal requests to travel abroad or within the country's regions. There are fears that a new law on religion, intended as a replacement to Decree 92, will cause further restriction. It is due to go before the legislature in late 2015 or 2016.⁴⁴ In the north-west and the Central Highlands of Vietnam, Christian groups have continued to face problems. Following a 2012 directive from the Ministry of the Interior's Committee on Religious Affairs there has been a clampdown on small house churches; and local governments refused to recognise the Catholic Church as legal in three of the country's northern provinces.

According to one assessment, worshippers in China suffered the harshest persecution seen in over a decade in 2014: 449 Church leaders were detained in 2014 compared with 54 in 2013, and as of January 2015 Christian Solidarity Worldwide had noted more than 650 incidents of government aggression in Zeijang province, involving the partial or full demolition of churches – many of which had already been registered and approved by the state. Increasingly state registration is no guarantee of protection from persecution. Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kion, Emeritus Bishop of Hong Kong, told Aid to the Church in Need: "The Chinese government has intensified the persecution recently. We have seen demolished churches, crosses taken away from the buildings, therefore there's not much we can hope for immediately. The Church is still enslaved to the government."⁴⁵

Events in Cuba were by contrast a sign of hope, as witnessed by the May 2015 meeting between Pope Francis and Cuban leader Raúl Castro. Cuban Communism and the Catholic Church, enemies of old, now seemed poised for reconciliation. But reports stated that Christians in Cuba continued to suffer state intolerance.⁴⁶

Russia and Turkey – Keeping Christians under close control

Russia, while much improved since Communist times, has used legislation dealing with illegal meetings, demonstrations, procession, and protests (Article 20.2, Part 2) to charge and oppress Christians meeting in rented cafés, cinemas, cultural centres, streets, playgrounds and public squares, even prosecuting believers for meeting in a private home. According to Forum 18: "Twenty three cases are known to have been brought against religious communities or individuals under Article 20.2, Part 2 in 2014."⁴⁷ Similarly Christian run centres have been charged with "illegal activity" under various regulations. In one instance a Baptist run rehabilitation centre in the village of Krasny Luch in Shakhty District was raided on suspicion of "illegal detention, forced manual labour, drug possession and illegal business activities."⁴⁸ Police failed to find evidence of illegal behaviour. Since Crimea fell under Russian rule in March 2014 the ban on "extremist" religious literature has also been extended to the region and all books in this category had to be turned over to authorities by the end of 2014.⁴⁹

Turkey has exhibited a similar tight control of religion over the years, and continues to place restrictions on non-Muslim groups, despite President Recep Erdogan's ostensible bids towards liberalisation in this area. Positive moves include a 2011 decree allowing the three non-Islamic minorities recognised by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne – Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic and Jews – to apply for properties seized by the government to be returned or compensated. 307 were returned – representing just under a quarter of the requests received by the beginning of 2014.

Culturally things look worse for Christians; museums that were originally churches have reverted to their use as mosques – and calls for this have mounted concerning Hagia Sophia, a museum since 1935.⁵⁰ Sporadic, isolated attacks on churches also continue. Erol Dora, the first and only Syriac member of parliament, put the country's recent positive changes in perspective, when he said: "The scale of the discrimination becomes obvious when news of [the first new church in a century] being built is hailed as such a monumental event."⁵¹

Conclusion

"We see today our persecuted brothers decapitated and crucified for their faith in Jesus before our eyes and often with our complicit silence."⁵²

Mindful of these words of Pope Francis from April 2015, this *Persecuted and Forgotten?* report seeks both to investigate the facts of Christian persecution in their proper context as well as draw attention to the scale of the crisis during the period under review. Violence against Christians was already so severe in the immediate run-up to the reporting period that in many countries it seemed inconceivable that it could get any worse; and yet, in many cases this is precisely what has happened. In fact, between 2013 and 2015, persecution intensified in more countries of greatest concern than over the previous two years – up from 13 to 15. The most significant finding for the period under review is that Christians in key countries – notably parts of the Middle East, but also regions of Africa – have fallen victim to a religiously-based ethnic cleansing powered by the fear – and sometimes the outright threat – of genocide.

Widespread concerns about mass killing were to a large extent justified by reports of Christians being killed – even on occasions entire communities. **Perpetrated by extremist Islamists, even more violent than Al Qaeda and other movements which preceded them, this violence has resulted in a massive exodus of Christians which could yet cause a complete wipeout within a decade in places such as Iraq.** Previously significant both in numbers and influence, these Christian communities have been in many cases scattered and forced to find refuge elsewhere. The story of their exodus is part of the mosaic of catastrophic developments that explain record numbers of refugees, as revealed by the United Nations in the summer of 2015.⁵³

While the threat of Islamist violence against Christians is of pre-eminent concern, the rise of other religious extremist movements has represented a major setback; in the likes of Sri Lanka, India and Israel, Christians are under threat from radical Buddhists, Hindus and Jews. Similarly there is little good news coming from countries overshadowed by totalitarian regimes such as China and North Korea. In these countries there has been a turn for the worse with Christians increasingly suffocated by communist and other authorities.

As a Catholic charity committed to helping Christians who suffer for their faith, Aid to the Church in Need is determined to do everything possible to help. Practical, pastoral help is the charity's core objective, supporting priests, Sisters and the faithful to proclaim the Gospel and promote Christian values – especially through faith formation. In a time of increasing humanitarian crisis, especially in Iraq and Syria, ACN is offering food, medicine and shelter. But aid is one thing, combating ignorance and misinformation is quite another. **Time and again, the bishops with whom the charity works in 140 countries worldwide, call on the charity to raise awareness around the world about the plight of Christians who suffer.** In a world that moves ever faster, they are increasingly aware of the need to grasp what few opportunities they have to speak out with prophetic voices for their persecuted people. Church leaders, especially in the Middle East, have increasingly made plain their disappointment with the West for – as they see it – abandoning them to their fate. And they say that the West has added responsibility since in their view it was intervention by governments in the West that directly led to the crisis they now face. Speaking at a seminar in France in March 2014, Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphael I Sako of Baghdad said:

Interventions [by the West] in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya have not all helped to solve the problem of their peoples. On the contrary, they have led to chaos and conflict that do not bode well for the future, especially for Christians. . . 1,400 years of Islam have not been able to take us away from our lands and our churches; now Western policy has scattered us to

the four corners of the earth. More and more Christians are being victimised, and their exodus from the Middle East appears unstoppable.⁵⁴

By providing accurate information and clear analysis, this report aims to empower those people willing and able to ensure that persecuted Christians are never forgotten.

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