

Events Occurring Since the Reporting Period (July-December 2010) International Religious Freedom Report

We have witnessed a number of significant developments since the end of 2010 that affect religious freedom in various countries around the world. Important events in 2011 include:

- **Middle East:** Popular uprisings starting in early 2011 continue to sweep the Middle East and North Africa. In a May 19 speech, President Obama emphasized that respect for religious freedom and protection of religious minorities is essential to successful democratic transitions and political and economic reforms.
- **Iran:** In March the Iranian government restored the 20-year prison sentences for seven Bahai leaders, after the sentences had been reduced to 10 years following the original August 2010 ruling. After two years in prison, the Bahai leaders were convicted of espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities, and propaganda against the Islamic Republic. The Iranian government also continued to repress, jail, and intimidate other religious minorities, including Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians, Jews, Sunnis, and Ahmadis, and other Shia who did not share the government's official religious views.
- **China:** Chinese security forces forcibly removed more than 300 Tibetan Buddhist monks from the Kirti Monastery in April, nearly a month after a Buddhist monk set himself on fire to protest government policies. The Chinese government also prevented Christians from outdoor worship services as part of the Shouwang church, a 1,000-member unofficial "house church" in Beijing. The Chinese government continued to implement measures that strictly regulated religious activity in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and in Tibetan areas.
- **Pakistan:** The government has not reformed a blasphemy law that has been used to prosecute those who belong to religious minorities, and in some cases Muslims who promote tolerance. The law has, at times, been misused to abuse people for reasons linked to personal vendettas. A prominent critic of this law, Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, was assassinated by one of his guards in January. In March Shahbaz Bhatti, the Minister for Minorities, a leading figure in Pakistan's

Christian community and central voice in favor of religious tolerance and pluralism, was assassinated in Islamabad. These killings took place amidst ongoing sectarian violence, such as the June 22 killing of Shia pilgrims near Quetta. Other systemic abuses remain, notably discriminatory legislation banning the Ahmadiyah sect and restricting the basic rights of Ahmadi believers.

These events are symptoms of deep societal intolerance and demonstrate the Government of Pakistan's inability or unwillingness to prevent violence and to hold perpetrators accountable. However, on Minorities Day, August 11, 2011, President Zardari renewed his government's commitment to protecting and assisting religious minorities. The government created a new federal Ministry of National Harmony charged with national oversight for protection of religious minorities. President Zardari also appointed Dr. Paul Bhatti, Governor Shahbaz Bhatti's brother, as a special advisor to the prime minister on religious minorities.

- **Iraq:** Targeted violence against Muslims and Christians has continued, including the April 2011 death of 10 worshippers in a Shia mosque and the June 2011 killing of 16 worshippers attending Friday prayers at a Sunni mosque near Tikrit. In August 2011, 15 Iraqis were injured when a car bomb exploded outside of the Holy Family Church in Kirkuk. The government of Iraq has taken steps to address the violence. It arrested, tried, and sentenced the perpetrators responsible for the October 2010 attack on a church in Baghdad that killed more than 50 people.
- **Egypt:** Sectarian violence continued after the fall of the Mubarak government. On January 1 a bomb at the Church of Two Saints in Alexandria killed 22 people and injured approximately 100 others. On February 23 soldiers fired on unarmed Copts at the Saint Bishoy Monastery over a land dispute, wounding six. On May 7 clashes between Muslims and Christians in Imbaba left 15 dead and 232 injured. In response to the Imbaba clashes, Egypt's military leader, Field Marshal Tantawi, issued a strongly-worded, public condemnation of sectarian attacks, and 48 suspects were subsequently referred to trial. Prime Minister Sharaf has ordered that 17 churches be allowed to re-open across Egypt.

- **Saudi Arabia:** In April the government imposed new restrictions on the media, including a ban on material that violates Islamic law or that damages the reputation of, or insults, Saudi religious leaders. More than 150 Shia were arrested following protests in March and April 2011 over the treatment of Shia in the predominantly Shiite Eastern Province. Saudi school textbooks continue to contain offensive statements about Jews and Christians, as well as discriminatory statements against Shia and Sufi Muslims and other religious groups. The Saudi government published these textbooks and distributed them free of charge to Saudi-sponsored libraries, mosques, and schools across the globe, from Argentina and Nigeria, to Pakistan and the United Kingdom.
- **Vietnam:** Significant challenges to religious freedom continued, especially at the provincial and village levels. Concerns include the re-imprisonment of Father Ly after he was paroled for 16 months for medical treatment, the slow pace of registration of religious groups, and harassment of some unrecognized groups. However, the government also showed some signs of progress. It facilitated construction of new places of worship, registered new congregations, and permitted the expansion of charitable activities.
- **Indonesia:** The February 6, 2011, attack on an Ahmadi leader's home by more than a thousand religious extremists left three people dead and six seriously wounded. None of the perpetrators was charged with homicide. On July 28, 2011, a court sentenced 12 individuals charged in the attack to three-to six-months' imprisonment. One of the victims was sentenced to six-months' imprisonment for resisting an officer and assault.
- **Tajikistan:** In August 2011, the government approved a Parental Responsibility Law that requires parents to "prevent children from participation in religious communities and organizations." Tajikistan has also banned mosque attendance for all women, limited the locations for worship, and regulated religious dress, private celebrations, and funeral services. Media reported that on the eve of Eid al-Fitr this August, police officers refused to allow children under 18 years old to enter the central Dushanbe mosque.

- **Nigeria:** In April 2011 the violent extremist group Boko Haram killed an Islamic cleric and ambushed police responding to the scene, wounding three officers. Clashes between individual Christian and Muslim believers often spiral into communal conflict. On February 15, after a property dispute between two individuals, an estimated 96 people died in sectarian violence that escalated for several days.

Despite the negative trends in religious freedom in many parts of the world, some developments are encouraging. In March 2011 the Human Rights Council unanimously adopted a resolution introduced by the Organization for Islamic Cooperation and cosponsored by the United States that calls on states to take proactive, concrete action against religious bigotry through tolerance education, awareness building, government outreach, service projects, and interfaith dialogue. Secretary Clinton lauded the new resolution as "a significant step forward in the global dialogue on countering intolerance, discrimination, and violence against persons based upon religion or belief." The United States also led a successful effort at the Human Rights Council to establish a Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran, who will report on abuses against religious minorities, among other issues.

In Ethiopia in March 2011, sectarian violence led to the burning of 69 churches, the destruction of several Christian homes, and one death. On June 21 an Ethiopian federal court sentenced 579 of the perpetrators to prison terms ranging from three months to 18 years. Since the government took firm action, violence has declined.

On another encouraging note, after extended discussions with religious minority community leadership, the Turkish government issued an August 27 decree inviting the country's religious minorities to reclaim properties confiscated by the government over the last 75 years.

As part of the overall efforts by the United States government to advance religious freedom, and in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, President Obama appointed a new Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, who took office in May 2011.