

## **Table of Contents:**

- [State Department Report on Religious Freedom](#) - (05.09.2000)
- [Asian churches alarmed at threat to religious minorities in South Asia](#) - (07.06.2000)

## **State Department Report on Religious Freedom**

The Associated Press (05.09.2000) / HRWF International Secretariat (06.09.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email : [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - A State Department report released Tuesday says a significant percentage of the world population does not have the right to religious freedom, and it names Iraq and Afghanistan among the worst offenders.

"Much of the world's population lives in countries in which the right to religious freedom is restricted or prohibited," the report says.

The situation exists even though 144 countries belong to an international covenant that acknowledges the right of all citizens to religious freedom, according to the study.

In 1998, Congress required the State Department to issue an annual report on the state of religious freedom worldwide. The 2000 report covers the period from July 1, 1999 to June 30, 2000 and includes reports on 194 countries and territories.

### ***Some highlights***

Iraq -- For decades, the government has conducted a "brutal campaign of murder, summary execution, and protracted arbitrary detention against religious leaders and

adherents of the majority Shiite population." Security forces murdered senior Shiite clerics, desecrated mosques and holy sites, arrested tens of thousands of Shiites and forcibly prevents Shiites from practicing their religion.

Afghanistan -- The government has engaged in persecution and killing, particularly against the Shiite minority. "The Taliban enforced its strict interpretation of Islamic Shari'a law, and, according to reports, public executions, floggings, and amputations took place weekly against those who violated the law."

China -- Government respect for religious freedom in China deteriorated as the persecution of several religious minorities increased. While membership in many faiths grew rapidly and government supervision of religious activity was minimal in some

regions, "government officials in other regions imposed tight regulations, closed houses of worship, and activity persecuted members of some unregistered religious groups."

Myanmar -- The government continued to repress systematically members of both minority faiths and the majority Buddhist population. "Buddhist monks who promoted human and political rights were arrested, and some Buddhist monasteries were destroyed. Government security forces frequently employed coercion to induce

Christian members of the Chin ethnic minority to convert to Buddhism."

The report also found varying degrees of repression in communist countries such as Cuba, North Korea and Vietnam. Among countries friendly to the United States, the report said religious discrimination exists in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel.

The study concluded there were "significant improvements" in Azerbaijan and Laos. In Azerbaijan, the report traced the changed situation to a presidential pledge last November to improve the status of religious minorities.

In Laos, the government released in mid-June a large number of Christians who had been imprisoned because of their faith, the report said.

It added that there were noteworthy improvements in 31 other countries.

[Back to the Table of Contents](#)

### **Asian churches alarmed at threat to religious minorities in South Asia**

ENI (07.06.2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (15.06.2000) - Website: [www.hrwf.net](http://www.hrwf.net) - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) -A meeting of church representatives from across Asia has warned that religious minorities - particularly Christians - face "serious threats from the majority communities in all South Asian countries, endangering freedom of religion".

A statement, adopted on 5 June at the 11th general assembly of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), pointed in particular to the rise of "Hindu fundamentalism in India and Nepal, Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Maldives, and Buddhist extremist tendencies in Sri Lanka".

The general assembly of the CCA, which groups more than 100 churches and national church councils throughout Asia, ended on 6 June.

In recent years, concern has been rising among India's Christians about the activities of Hindu fundamentalists, who they claim are attacking Christians across the country. The Christian community's anxiety increased in 1998 when the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), which is linked to Hindu nationalist groups, became the main party in a national coalition government. Christians believe that the BJP is promoting the "Hinduisation" of India.

In neighbouring Pakistan, a Catholic bishop, John Joseph of Faisalabad, took his own life on 6 May 1998 to protest against the country's blasphemy laws which impose a mandatory death sentence for blasphemy against Islam. Christians are also concerned about the country's electoral system, under which Muslims are allowed to vote only for Muslim parliamentary candidates and Christians can vote only for Christians. They believe that this marginalises Christians.

The CCA gathering called on the governments in India and Pakistan to provide "adequate protection to Christians and other minority communities", and to abolish "laws and regulations that are intended to restrict religious freedom". The CCA also called on Pakistan to abolish the blasphemy laws and the separate electoral system.

Dr Mathews George Chunakara, the CCA's executive secretary for international affairs, told ENI that a recent study by the CCA had found increasing religious fundamentalism in all South Asian countries. The situation had been "getting worse" since the CCA's

last assembly five years ago in Sri Lanka. Religious intolerance was on the rise in countries such as Myanmar and Indonesia, he added.

Of all religious minorities in the region, Christians were the "most affected" by the growth of fundamentalism, Dr Chunakara added.

The CCA gathering also expressed concern about "freelance missionary" activities by some churches and Christian organisations from affluent Asian and Western countries, which it said were jeopardising "inter-religious relations and communal harmony" in South Asia.

These purported missionary activities were also causing serious problems within the Christian denominations in South Asia "as they lure away local pastors and lay leaders with monetary support".

Among other statements, the CCA assembly:

- \* Appealed to the Indonesian government to "enforce the rule of law" in Maluku, where violence erupted in January 1999 between Christians and Muslims, and has since spread to other areas of Indonesia. It also called on the Indonesian government to halt the activities of 2000 "Jihad warriors" who recently went to Maluku to wage a "holy war" against Christians;

- \* Called on the Indonesian government to "investigate human rights violations" in the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya, whose population "have been experiencing violence, oppression, torture, racism, genocide, social and economic exploitation". In recent years there has been a conflict between government forces and a separatist movement in the province, which was handed over to Indonesia by The Netherlands in 1963;

\* Called for the "immediate cessation of hostilities" in Sri Lanka, where government forces are fighting Tamil separatists in the north of the island, and urged both the government and the Tamil guerrillas to seek "third-party facilitation assisted by the government of India" to reach a political solution to the conflict;

\* Expressed "deep concern" about the situation in Fiji, where the military is now in control after an armed group of indigenous Fijians took the Indo-Fijian prime minister and other politicians hostage last month. The CCA said that it appreciated the concerns of indigenous Fijians, but it stressed "the fundamental democratic principle that all citizens, including citizens of Indian descent in Fiji, must have equal rights";

\* Called on Asian governments to halt "the excesses" of the arms trade between Asian countries, as well as from Western countries to Asia;

\* Encouraged Asian churches to join the campaign for debt cancellation to assist the world's poorest countries and to find ways "to break the stranglehold of debt and to achieve a new just global order";

\* Expressed concern about the "negative impact of the globalisation on the economy, market, trade and culture" which had "dramatically worsened the economic and political gap within and among countries, leading to greater exploitation and impoverishment of a greater number of people".