

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 9, 2013 at 8:42am

Africa rises, China falls on Christian persecution list

by Lauren Markoe by Religion News Service

Washington — The persecution of Christians "vastly rose" in 2012 as radical Islamists consolidated power in Africa, according to Open Doors, a Christian missionary organization that publishes an annual list of offending nations.

Increasing threats to African Christians can be seen in focused attacks, such as the killings of Christians in Nigerian churches by the radical Muslim group Boko Haram, but also in the greater prevalence of radical Muslims in government, according to the California-based Open Doors.

In Mali, for example, which made the biggest leap on the "World Watch List," from unranked in 2011 to No. 7 in 2012, a coup in the north brought fundamentalist Muslims to power. "The situation in the north used to be a bit tense, but Christians and even missionaries could be active," said Open Doors spokesman Jerry Dykstra.

Now, he said, Christians there are in grave danger.

North Korea topped Open Doors' list for the 11th year in a row, and was followed by Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia. The group estimates that as many as 70,000 Christians are imprisoned in North Korea simply for being Christian, and the act of carrying a Bible can result in execution.

In neighboring China, the picture for Christians continues to improve, as that country slid from No. 21 in 2011 to No. 37 in 2012 -- a stark difference from its Top 10 ranking five years ago.

More than 100 Chinese Christians still languish in prison, and the government still keeps close tabs on church officials, but "house searches, and the confiscation of Bibles and Christian books no longer occur on a large scale," according to Open Doors.

Syria, now in the throes of a bloody revolution, became a country of particular concern for the group, which pegged it at No. 11 in 2012 and No. 36 the previous year, the report's second-biggest jump. Under President Bashar al-Assad, who is now waging a ruthless campaign against Syrian rebels, "Christians were allowed the freedom to worship but not evangelize," according to Open Doors.

Ron Boyd-McMillan, chief strategy officer for the organization, said Syrian Christians have been hit with a "double whammy," in that they are under pressure from rebels fighting against the regime and from radical jihadists who have entered Syria with an anti-Christian agenda.

"The good news in Syria is those Christians who are left behind are showing a great unity among different denominations," Boyd-McMillan said. "The suffering has drawn them together."

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