

Cross-Party Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief

1st March 2023, 6 to 7.30pm

Minute

Present

MSPs

John Mason MSP
Murdo Fraser MSP

Invited Guests

Alan Meldrum

Non-MSP Group Members

Michael Veitch
Elisabeth Manson
Anna Marie Djordjevic
Charles Warren
Maureen Sier
Richa Sinha
Brian Miller
Nigel Kenny
Moussa Haddad
Gordon Matheson
Oliver Lane
James Fraser
David Meredith
Linda Greenshields
Ian Greenshields
Craig Horne
Chris Holland
Matt Holden
Riona Duncan
Dr Idris
Revd Bonnie Evans-Hill
Linda Oxburgh
Gordon Macdonald
Lorraine McMahon
Claire Sweeney

Apologies

Jeremy Balfour MSP
Mridula Chakraborty
Heather Begarnie
Sister Isabel Smyth
Sabah Aslam

Agenda item 1

Quorate

As John Mason MSP and Murdo Fraser MSP were present, the meeting was quorate.

John opened the meeting by welcoming everyone to our first hybrid meeting of the group. He proposed the adoption of the minutes and Murdo Fraser seconded it.

There were no matters arising. John thanked Alan Meldrum from Open Doors for coming to address the group again.

Agenda item 2

Report from Alan Meldrum of Open Doors into persecution of Christians and other religious minorities around the world

Alan

It's a privilege to talk about the World Watch List. Every January, Open Doors produces a report ranking countries that have shown the worst levels of persecution of Christians and other faith minorities. For 30 years we have been doing this research. A university in Holland undertakes it for us, so the same data points are used with each report, which makes the reports and their data quite a unique resource. They look at where it is hardest to be a Christian, from number one where it is worst, down to number 100. Last year Afghanistan became the worst country, taking over from North Korea.

Christianity is the biggest faith in the world, representing about a third of the population of the planet. Where Christians are discriminated against, other minority groups are likely to also experience discrimination. So the report focuses on Christians, but what it describes are not limited to Christians. 360 million Christians experience high levels of persecution and discrimination. That means discrimination in relation to jobs, opportunities, and even where they are allowed to live. At high levels it can involve violence and even death. So these are extreme cases of persecution we measure.

1 in 8 Christians worldwide face persecution just because of their faith. We know that one of the key human rights is to have your own faith, and be able to change your faith. Each day at least 15 Christians are killed for their faith in Jesus. 95% of killings last year were in sub-Saharan Africa, the majority in Nigeria - despite the fact that Nigeria is a majority Christian country. This is because the extremist Muslim groups there feel the only way they can make it a Muslim country is through the murder of Christians.

Last year 2110 churches were attacked, many being destroyed completely. Many officers in the Myanmar army take the unrest as an opportunity to destroy churches. Around 140,000 Christians were displaced from their home or country for faith-related reasons. Last year 4542 believers were detained without trial, arrested, sentenced, and imprisoned.

The region which saw the sharpest increase is Latin America. For example in Mexico there is a movement to remove Christians because they are known to stand up against the mafia. So the mafia are known to pre-emptively attack and kill Christians.

In North Korea we support about 80,000 Christians, as does Release International. There is no established church in North Korea, nevertheless it is a growing community there. Tragically, Christians suffer greatly there.

Extremes levels of persecution is often found in a band around the planet, covering much of North and Central Africa, Asia and Central America. We see other minority groups being heavily persecuted in these areas too.

India has moved up the list to number 11 due to the growth of Hindu nationalism, which means there is persecution and discrimination of Muslims, Christians, Sikhs etc. Afghanistan's level of persecution has dropped in the rankings but only because there are now very few Christians remaining in the country as so many have fled the country.

North Korea is an entirely closed country. To be found to be a Christian there is a death sentence. This is despite the fact that the faith has no possible power over the country's sitting dictator.

In Somalia if you are convert to Christianity, and you happen to be female, then you are likely to be killed by your family. And if you are a Christian from birth then you will experience extensive discrimination. And if you are a Christian woman then you are likely to be kidnapped for sex trafficking.

Yemen has very little tolerance for any faith other than Islam. Despite this there have been other faiths there for many years.

Eritrea does not allow any other faith than the Coptic Christian faith and so Pentecostal Christians and others are persecuted.

In Pakistan there is a great deal of mob rule. Police may stand by as mobs burn down your farm or run you out of the country. Christians are also often imprisoned for false charges, and in Iran Christian women have even less rights than other women do. If you are a convert, you are likely to be imprisoned for it.

Across 26 nations in Africa that recorded at least high levels of persecution against Christians the number of violent attacks against believers rose by 5%. Sudan had been improving but has gone back down in this year's assessment sadly.

China is using increasingly sophisticated surveillance of Christians. Sharing illegal content such as sermons and podcasts, even on social media, is highly risky. Where

China leads, other nations follow. This toxic mixture of authoritarianism, nationalism and technology has been adopted by other countries like India, Russia and Turkey, with many other nations not far behind. This is a deeply alarming trend for millions of believers around the world.

Agenda item 3

Next steps

There was a brief discussion about future meeting topics and John Mason described having reached out to representatives of both the Jehovah's Witness & Humanist communities about making presentation to the group to ensure it retains a wide focus.