

Republican Perspective
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THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

"For it is in giving that we receive." Francis of Assisi

Five days from now, Christmas will be celebrated across the land. While we are fortunate in the U.S. to enjoy religious freedom, that does not hold true for many Christians throughout the world.

In Pakistan, two students were beat to death because of their Christian faith. A 17 year old was beaten by his Muslim classmate after he became known as a Christian. In another death, an eighth grade student got into an argument with fellow Muslim classmates that escalated into a fight. One of these classmates was related to a Pakistani policeman. Six policemen showed up where the student was studying after school and began beating him. They then threw him into a police van and took him to a hospital where he was pronounced dead.

Somalia has little tolerance for Christians. Last year, the government announced a ban on Christmas and New Year's celebrations saying, they "could damage the faith of the Muslim community." The government went on to say that "all people in Somalia are Sunni Muslims." Underground churches had planned to hold celebrations in homes but feared the ban would lead to violence against Christians.

The U.S. State Department estimates that Shia Muslims, Christians and other groups constitute less than 1 percent of Somalia's nearly 15 million population. "It is not true to say that there is no Christian community in Somalia," a Christian leader said. "The government is aware of several brutal killings that Somali secret Christians have undergone in Somalia."

Christians in Azerbaijan face increasing government persecution for their faith. Religious groups are required to register with the government and minority religious organizations are often either denied the registration or kept waiting for the application to be processed.

Two Jehovah's Witnesses were charged for distributing Bible literature "without permission", a crime which carried a \$8,600 fine. The two were additionally detained for 11 months while the Azerbaijanian government searched their homes

and confiscated their property. The government also fined and imprisoned a Baptist pastor, Hamid Shabanov, for leading worship services without state permission, even though he repeatedly tried to register his congregation and was repeatedly denied.

Turkey's President Erdogan has chosen to hold Pastor Andrew Brunson hostage for over 14 months because of his Christian faith. For over 23 years, Pastor Brunson has lived peacefully in Turkey, serving as pastor of the Izmir Resurrection Church and raising his family without incident. In October 2016, Pastor Andrew was arrested and was told he was considered a "national security risk." He then was charged with "membership in an armed terrorist organization."

Pastor Brunson has reiterated that his purpose in being in Turkey for the past 23 years was "for one purpose only. To tell about Jesus Christ." He has further stated that he has "done this openly, in front of the government." Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson directly raised Pastor Brunson's case with President Erdogan on his visit to Turkey.

Secretary Tillerson, in his remarks prefacing the State Department's release of the 2016 International Religious Freedom (IRF) Report, stated that "80 percent of the global population live with restrictions on or hostilities to limit their freedom of religion." This is a staggering statistic. The 2016 IRF Report emphasized that the worldwide atrocities committed by the terrorist group, ISIS, are "crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing." Secretary Tillerson concluded that "ISIS is clearly responsible for genocide against Yazidis, Christians and Shia Muslims in areas it controlled."

The IRF report noted that Christians in Sudan are in danger of government persecution and potential execution for their religious practices. It highlighted several accounts of pastors imprisoned for the practice of their faith.

This Christmas, cherish America's religious freedoms.