
Persecuted Christians. ACN: “Over 300 Christians unjustly imprisoned each month across the globe”

In Eritrea, Abune Antonios, Patriarch of the Orthodox Church of Tawahedo, has been under house arrest since 2007, on no charge; in China, the Bishop of Baoding, James Su Zhimin, has been in prison without trial for almost 25 years. No one knows if Leah Sharibu is still alive in Nigeria. The young woman is one of over 100 students kidnapped by Boko Haram in February 2018, the only Christian and the only prisoner who was not released after refusing to give up her faith in exchange for her freedom. In Pakistan at the age of 14 Maira Shahbaz was abducted at gunpoint, repeatedly raped, compelled to renounce her Christian faith and forced into marriage. She managed to escape and is since in hiding due to death threats. These are just some of the stories contained in **“Set your captives free” the first Report on Christians unjustly detained for their faith**, released today by the Pontifical Foundation **Aid to the Church in Need**. The Report, ACN explained, “reviews government activity as well as that of extremist groups. Cases described include prisoners of conscience, arbitrary detention, unfair trials, degrading prison conditions, reports of torture and pressure to leave the Christian faith.” The preface was written by **Asia Bibi**, symbol of unjust imprisonment caused by anti-Christian hate. The Pakistani woman accused of blasphemy writes: *“It is time for governments to take action. It is time to stand up for our vulnerable, poor and persecuted faith communities. We must continue until the oppressor finally hears our cry: set your captives free.”*

has jailed without charge 1,147 Christians for faith-related reasons, accounting for 30% of the faithful unjustly detained worldwide, 561 more than the previous year, reflecting a sharp deterioration in the government's treatment of Christians, with demolitions of churches, destruction of crosses and other religious symbols, in addition to State interference in almost every aspect of Church life, from the appointment of bishops to Christian charities.” Christians are not the only religious minority subjected to unjust imprisonment. The ACS Report points refers of “Rohingya Muslims, and their Uyghur fellow worshipers held in concentration camps in China; in Assam State, India, nearly 2 million people, mostly of Islamic faith, were threatened with imprisonment or deportation in September 2019 after their names were excluded from the National Register of Citizens.”



Immagine non disponibile

The impact of COVID-19, the Report states, had a direct bearing on trends concerning unjust detention. There was a “somewhat mixed impact.” In fact, at the beginning of the pandemic, authoritarian regimes “eased pressure on non-official religious groups” to focus on the health emergency, only to subsequently reinstate their systems of control and detention of Christians. “The partial or total closure of courtrooms and other legal activities worsened the situation, causing further delays for imprisoned Christians awaiting an appeal verdict. Furthermore, with religious services taking place online due to anti-Covid restrictions and lockdown, authoritarian governments were able to increase surveillance and repression of those found participating in alleged illegal activities”. On top of this, “while governments were struggling to respond to the pandemic, non-governmental actors involved in violent attacks against Christians managed to perpetuate their persecutory actions. Islamist militant groups are an example of this.” **Religious minorities at risk.** Given the number of religious minority groups affected by unjust imprisonment, “it is vital to act quickly,” the Report points out. When denouncing pretexts used to unjustly incarcerate people against their will - for profit, sexual abuse, ethnic reasons - the cases of imprisonment on religious grounds must not be underrated.” *“Religious hatred as a cause of unjust imprisonment has been underestimated for too long. If it is not openly recognized - ACN denounced - these religious minorities will be increasingly in danger.”*

Daniele Rocchi