

CORONAVIRUS AND PERSECUTION

AN ADDITIONAL VULNERABILITY

It is clear that this global pandemic takes a grim toll on those who are already vulnerable. Across the world, belonging to a religious minority is an additional – and potentially lethal – vulnerability. For Christians already facing persecution and discrimination on a daily basis, COVID-19 has prompted additional threats and dangers. There is an urgent need to respond to this aspect of the crisis.

How are Christians experiencing this additional vulnerability?

1. Discrimination in aid distribution

A pastor in southern Kaduna State in **Nigeria** says “The sharing of the aid from the government is done wrongly – the Christians have been marginalised. I’m not just saying this just because I feel so. I’m saying this because I’ve seen it. The inhabitants of neighbouring non-Christian communities received much bigger portions of rice and noodles. We’ve had Christians faint and collapse in the struggles of trying to get food for their family.”

In **India**, a Christian was expelled from his village. After remaining elsewhere for some time, he attempted to return. The village chief tried to force him to leave again. While everyone else in the village received food rations, he was left out. A local houseowner has also filed a false murder accusation against him.

Simon Chakma, a Christian in **Bangladesh**, said “The authorities think that we, Christians, get a lot of support from foreign Christian organisations, so they use that as an excuse to not give us our relief aid.”

Another NGO (ADF International) reports from **the Gulf region** that “People have become so desperate that they are forced to trade their religion in exchange for food. They are forced to convert to Islam just for one sack of flour.”

Note: these are all examples of situations where national government aid is being distributed by local

authorities. Open Doors and its local church partners do step in to support Christians when they are being left last in line in these situations. Most secular foreign organisations use local staff at the frontline of aid distribution, and they can also then discriminate against Christians and other minorities, regardless of the foreign organisations’ anti-discrimination policies.

2. Discrimination in employment

An Open Doors staff member received a phone call from a Christian nurse. The woman said, “We are so tired. This morning we discovered that Christian nurses are being assigned Corona cases, because it is dangerous and the non-Christian nurses don’t want the risk. We are dispensable.”

At the beginning of lockdown AsiaNews reported that sanitation workers in the Gulf region, mostly Christian, continue to work despite their lack of masks and other protective gear. The job, which comes with great health risks, involves collecting waste, emptying sewers, cleaning the streets, all by hand. Now the workers could become the carriers of the new virus. “I am very worried about them,” said Saleh Diego, vicar general of the Archdiocese of Karachi. Sanitation workers “are the most neglected and marginalised in society. We see them in the streets without masks or gloves.”

Sooba Bhatti, an activist from Hyderabad, India, said, “These people face a serious predicament, and put their lives at risk. Even women sanitation workers perform their tasks without gloves, protective masks and even shoes.”

3. Blamed for the pandemic

In many countries, religious minorities can be blamed for the spread of the virus. This has been experienced by Muslims in **India**, for example. Open Doors has received reports of Christians being accused of responsibility from **Uganda** and **Niger**. The BBC reported that in **Somalia**, the Islamic extremist al-Shabaab group is warning Muslims that Christians are transmitters of the disease. Messaging like this is terrifying for the handful of Christians who are already forced to practise their faith in absolute secrecy, in fear for their lives.

4. Vulnerable in lockdown

In **Nigeria**, Fulani militants have carried out multiple raids on villages in Kaduna and Plateau States, killing 32 Christians. Villagers were obeying local state directives to keep to their homes to prevent the spread of the virus, and Christians believe that the attacks were part of a wider agenda to uproot them from the area. One said "The community made efforts to alert security agents, but nothing was done to prevent it," adding "If people are going to stay in their homes during the COVID-19 pandemic, they need to feel safe from attacks like this."

Combatting vulnerability

Open Doors has consistently drawn attention to the double vulnerability of those experiencing persecution. In our 2020 World Watch List Advocacy report, we stated "The Department for International Development (DfID) needs to recognise religion as a potential vulnerability in any needs assessment underpinning its development or humanitarian programming... Vulnerability due to religious identity should be included in any vulnerability criteria."

- July 2017: Lord Alton asked a series of questions around the issue of identifying and recognising the vulnerability of religious minorities, and the replies were very clear: "DFID's partners do not identify or record beneficiaries by their religious affiliation or ethnicity."
- November 2018: a discussion at Wilton Park explored how the delivery of humanitarian

and development aid could better address the complex and contextual needs of religious minority groups in conflict and crisis settings. Its closing statement indicated that "The intersection between the chaos of crisis and religious minority status dramatically increases vulnerabilities, yet assistance providers to date have been slow to recognise the significance of religion as a factor."

- June 2019: a written answer stated "DFID has reviewed and assessed the Wilton Park Statement on assisting religious minorities in humanitarian crises. Policy Teams will investigate how to incorporate the recommendations into their policy plans. We will continue to regularly challenge our partners to demonstrate that they are doing all they can to meet the needs of the most vulnerable people, including those from religious minorities."
- October 2019: DfID replied to a further written question: "In November 2018, Lord Ahmad and Lord Bates launched a £12 million initiative which will contribute to making poverty reduction programmes more inclusive, by highlighting and redressing religious inequalities, with a focus on highly volatile contexts." This initiative was to be overseen by The Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID), set up to provide research evidence and deliver practical programmes which aim to redress the impact of discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, tackle poverty and exclusion, and promote people's wellbeing and empowerment.
- November 2019: a Parliamentary answer reflected the need to gather data on religious minorities, in order to undertake this task, and was a welcome sign of change: "We currently collect data on minority status when there is a specific need for it, such as for our programmes which specifically aim at helping minority groups."

So, change has been in the air, but has it gone far enough? It is clear that in his 2019 Independent Review of the FCO's work to support persecuted Christians, the Bishop of Truro was concerned about progress in this area, stating "In the light of the international observations identified in the course

of this Independent Review regarding the negative consequences of the mantra of 'need not creed', active and urgent cross-governmental consideration must be given to rejecting this approach. The Foreign Secretary should reject the mantra in FCO foreign policy contexts entirely."

The report's recommendations included this: "The FCO to lead a cross-departmental evaluation and discussion of regional policy (for departments with an international focus) to recognise religious affiliation as a key vulnerability marker for members of religious minorities. In the light of the international observations identified in the course of this Independent Review regarding the negative consequences of the mantra of 'need not creed', active and urgent cross-governmental consideration must be given to rejecting this approach."

When the pandemic began to impact vulnerable people across the world, questions were asked on the government's response to COVID-19. Lord Ahmad explained that "guidance was circulated across DFID highlighting that inclusion must be central to our response and the specific contexts and needs of all religious minorities should be taken into account when developing practical programmes to tackle COVID-19."

But when, on 5 May 2020, another question was met with the answer "We are currently looking at how we can best support vulnerable groups through the crisis" it prompted reservations about whether DfID was yet taking seriously enough the task of identifying the religious and ethnic identity of beneficiaries as part of ensuring that these and other vulnerable groups are both given positive support and protected from discrimination in the delivery of aid.

It is one thing to have good intentions. It is not the same as knowing whether these are intentionally being put into practice, and being sure that delivery matches the intention.

***The Last in Line* campaign**

That's why Open Doors has launched *The Last in Line* campaign. Supporters are contacting their MP, urging



them to **ACT NOW** by asking the Secretary of State for International Development:

1. Will you ensure that the UK continues to focus on combatting poverty by ensuring that aid reaches the most vulnerable, including those who are even more vulnerable because of their faith?
2. What steps are being taken to ensure that religious identity is taken into account when allocating aid?
3. What mechanisms are in place to ensure that Christians – and other religious minorities – on the frontlines of UK aid distribution do not face additional discrimination because of their faith?

Open Doors welcomes the statement that "UK aid prioritises support for the poorest and most excluded people and communities in Pakistan regardless of race, religion, social background or nationality. Our programmes target the most marginalised, some of whom are likely to be from religious minority groups; and some UK projects in Pakistan specifically aim to tackle the drivers underpinning intolerance and discrimination, through promoting greater understanding between communities. DFID Pakistan uses a range of approaches to monitor and evaluate our programmes. Every programme within the portfolio is required to develop a comprehensive monitoring plan to enable assessment and verification of how our aid is used and see whether the programme is achieving planned results and impact." (Written answer, 5 May 2020)

The coronavirus pandemic is having such a major impact on Christians facing persecution that it is vital that their vulnerability is assessed, fully taken into account in all aid programmes, acted on with urgency and carefully monitored to ensure that they do not remain the last in line.

Coronavirus, global poverty and persecuted Christians

Academic assessments of the global impact of the pandemic on world poverty suggests that all the progress in reducing poverty since the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015 has been lost. 2020 will be the first time this century that the number of poor people will rise: it is now predicted that in post-COVID-19 2020 there will be about 50 million more people living in extreme poverty (The Brookings Institute).

Of the 12 countries where this rise in people who are poor will be over one million, eight appear in the Open Doors World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian: India (10), Nigeria

(12), Indonesia (49), Bangladesh (38), Ethiopia (39), Afghanistan (2), Sudan (7) and Pakistan (5).

The global pandemic is therefore set to increase poverty dramatically in some of the countries where religious minorities are most vulnerable.

The Prime Minister was clear in his Christmas message "Today of all days, I want us to remember those Christians around the world who are facing persecution. For them, Christmas Day will be marked in private, in secret, perhaps even in a prison cell. As Prime Minister, that's something I want to change. We stand with Christians everywhere, in solidarity, and will defend your right to practice your faith."

As Open Doors CEO Henrietta Blyth wrote In the 2020 World Watch List Advocacy report, **"As the United Kingdom redefines its global future, I urge all Parliamentarians to do all you can to ensure that the persecution of Christians worldwide remains an issue at the top of the government's agenda."**



www.opendoorsuk.org | advocacy@opendoorsuk.org
Open Doors UK & I, PO Box 6, Witney, OX29 6W