

Christian Solidarity Worldwide; North Korea, Myanmar/Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia

Grateful for the opportunity to give evidence.

I will go through country by country and give a few highlights in the time I have. What I say may prompt questions.

North Korea

There is no freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) at all. In many countries there is persecution but to varying degrees, Christians have some room for worship. In North Korea (NK) there is no FoRB at all. To be a Christian is to put your life in danger. If you are found to possess a bible or attend a meeting in small groups with others you would end up in a prison camp or in some cases individuals have been executed. It's consequently very dangerous to be a Christian in NK. Those who escape into China – if they are sent back by China to NK and there are suspicions that they have been in contact with South Korean missionaries in China then their situation is even more dangerous.

I visited once with Lord Alton and Baroness Cox in 2010. We visited 4 state sanctioned churches – 2 protestant, 1 Catholic and the other Russian orthodox – these are for the benefit of foreigners with the exception of the Russian church which may be a more genuine the congregation. The others are show churches and if you observe those churches you get this impression.

Myanmar/Burma

Christians in Burma are facing varying degrees forms of restrictions, discrimination and persecution. There are 2 drivers of persecution – the military and the rise of an extremist Buddhist nationalist movement. This has had some impact on Christians. It's tied up with ethnicity and there is a religious dimension to the ethnic conflict and also a desire for autonomy as well. In Kachin state which is majority Christian, there is active conflict with the military, churches have been targeted. At least 200 churches have been destroyed. In Chin state where there is no conflict there has been a policy of the military tearing down crosses. They have a tradition of putting up crosses on mountain tops and the military tear them down and put up pagodas instead. In 2 other states there is no conflict but Christians face discrimination, restrictions and persecution.

There is increasing pressure from society as well. A group wanted to build a small chapel and a meeting place to pray and they got permission and started to build, then the villagers themselves objected and started throwing stones. All this is in CSW's latest report *"Burma's identity crisis: How ethno-religious nationalism has led to religious intolerance, crimes against humanity and genocide."*¹ Christian gatherings have been disrupted by Buddhists, so Christians are being targeted by the military and by Buddhist nationalists. The language coming from Buddhist nationalists is to portray Christianity as a "guest" religion" and it is extremely difficult to get permission to get a new church built or to renovate. There is a certain amount of freedom of worship but not FoRB.

Indonesia

Last month I was there during the presidential elections. It is very concerning there. Indonesia has the largest Muslim majority. There is a good tradition of pluralism and moderate Islam but that has changed in the last 10-20 years where Islamism has risen. Christians face a combination of dangers – churches that have been forced to close down by the local authorities under pressure from the

¹ <https://www.csw.org.uk/2019/05/21/report/4339/article.htm>

FPI (Islamic Defenders Front) who are responsible for harassing and forcing the closure of churches. There have been some well-known cases and it has risen to the attention of national government.

For example, the “HKBP Filadelfia Church” in Bekasi – a suburb of Jakarta – a fully legal registered church but a few years ago it was forcibly closed from pressure from Islamists. The church challenged the closure in the local courts and eventually supreme courts, and the courts ruled that they should be allowed to re-open.

Local authorities are not implementing the court order. There are periodic threats from terrorism. In Medan, North Sumatra in 2016 a man came into a Catholic church during Sunday mass and tried to detonate explosives. They failed to detonate, and he then unleashed a sword and attacked the priest. Mercifully the priest escaped injury as people overpowered the man. There was an attack in May last year by a family of suicide bombers on three churches in Surabaya– a first church was attacked by the boys, then the mother and her 8 year-old daughter attacked the second and then the father attacked the third church with a car laden with explosives. It was Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal church that were the targets by the family.

There are 2 positives from Indonesia. The current president is more committed to the Indonesian tradition of pluralism and is seen by Christians as a defender of minorities. However, he has not done as much in his first term and has now been reelected, so we must encourage him to use his second term to prioritise religious freedom. The number of state level cases has declined and the threat from non-state actors has declined.

The second area of hope is that there are more initiatives on interfaith dialogue and relationship and individual Muslim groups that defend Christians. Some Muslim groups go to churches for example at Christmas

With reference to the Blasphemy law, there is the famous case of the Governor of Jakarta – his political opponents couldn’t challenge him on political grounds and so they played the religious card – telling people they shouldn’t vote for a non-Muslim and in the middle of re election he was jailed for blasphemy. He was released recently.

Malaysia

I want to highlight the interplay between race and religion. To be Malay is to be Muslim – this relates to apostasy laws – so any who try to convert face serious trouble. And there are re education camps – you are put in this camp for a period of time. I don’t think there is physical mistreatment but surely psychological and an effort to renounce Christianity.

There are several cases of disappearance. Pastor Koh, Joshua Hilmy and then a Shia Muslim. The Human Rights Commission concluded that agents of the police were responsible. CSW put out a press release at the time which you can refer to for more detail.

Questions and Answers

Q -do you meet with foreign office officials in country.

Burma/Malaysia/Indonesia – yes, I do.

The Embassy was very involved with the visit to NK. I have a good relationship with them. They are receptive to receiving information. I don’t detect any particular problems, but I can’t think of specific examples when they have gone out of their way to take up a Christian case.

Burma – in previous years I felt that the embassy was too Yangon centric and wasn't engaging with the ethnic states but it has changed for the better with recent Ambassadors – also aware of them meeting a number of contacts that I have suggested. I don't have any complaints but no good examples.

I meet with the US and sometimes the EU and the Canadians and the Australians. I would say that that the US is ahead of the others in terms of support for persecuted Christians. They have the office and the Ambassador for FoRB and are more consistently proactive in following up cases and making representations.

Policy recommendations.

- Encourage attention on persecution of Christians in the context of all FoRB. Indonesia – raise Shia and other groups' issues. Speak up for everyone.
- There is room for more coordination with those who have Ambassadors at large.
- Taiwan has appointed a FoRB representative. There should be more regular contact with other state FoRB actors from the Foreign Secretary.

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