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## ACN: severe religious freedom violations in one third of world countries, growing societal control

Against the backdrop of a global context marked by high tensions, more than 4.9 billion people live in countries that violate religious freedom. Severe violations of religious freedom against citizens were found in 61 countries. These were the findings of the 16th Report on Religious Freedom in the World published by the pontifical foundation Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), presented at the Italian Embassy to the Holy See in Rome today. The Report, published every two years since 1999, provides a comprehensive global analysis (196 countries) assessing the state of this fundamental human right for the faithful of all religious traditions. The Report covers the period from May 2021 to December 2022. According to the Report, “terror attacks, mass surveillance, anti-conversion laws, financial restrictions, voter manipulation, attacks on cultural heritage, and misleading religious population data”, are the main causes of oppression of the believers of religious minorities worldwide. The Report explains that even in non-classified nations violation of religious freedom occurred in a climate of growing impunity. **Three categories.** Countries are divided into three categories: Red, Orange and Under Observation. The Red category denotes the existence of “persecution.” It includes 28 countries that are home to a total population of 4.02 billion, or 51.6% of the world's population. Orange (Discrimination) includes 33 countries where significant changes occurred during the period covered. Finally, the “Under observation” countries are those whose reports show “not only a steady increase in violations, but incidents qualifying as varying degrees of intolerance, discrimination and sometimes persecution.” The Red category, which indicates the existence of persistent persecution, includes 28 countries that are home to 4.03 billion people, who together account for more than half (51.6 per cent) of the world's population. Thirteen of these 28 countries are in Africa, where the situation has worsened dramatically in many regions. The Orange category, signalling discrimination, includes 33 countries with a population of almost 853 million people. The Under Observation category includes countries where critical emerging factors could lead to a significant decline in religious freedom. **Increasing violations.** In its Report, ACN denounces that “globally, the retention and consolidation of power in the hands of autocrats and fundamentalist group leaders led to increased violations of all human rights, including religious freedom. A combination of terrorist attacks, destruction of religious heritage and symbols (Turkey, Syria), electoral system manipulation (Nigeria, Iraq), mass surveillance (China), proliferation of anti-conversion laws and financial restrictions (Southeast Asia and Middle East) increased the oppression of all religious communities. In addition, “hybrid” cases of so-called “polite” - though equally vicious - persecution have become more common. In most cases, the Report says, governments have applied controversial laws that restrict religious freedom or discriminate against certain religious communities in the face of no opposition. At the same time, acts of violence against members of the 'wrong' religion have become 'normalised' and largely go unpunished (Latin America). The number of majority religious communities facing persecution is growing, including in Nigeria and Nicaragua. A “culture of impunity” is also on the rise, due to “an increasingly muted response from the international community towards atrocities committed by autocratic regimes such as China and India.” Nigeria and Pakistan have also escaped international sanctions and other condemnation following reports of religious freedom violations against their own citizens. The changing tactics of transnational jihadist networks in Africa are now seeing the rise of “opportunistic caliphates”, i.e. a shift from the conquest and defence of pre-determined territories to “hit-and-run” attacks aimed at creating isolated communities, as in Mozambique, in poorly defended rural areas, ideally rich in mineral resources (Democratic Republic of Congo). The trend today is to impose taxes and illegal trade, leading to the creation of a state within a state. Insecurity and lack of government control are the cause of uprisings and military coups (two in Mali and one in Burkina Faso). There are also internal tensions in Islamic communities, where on the one hand “dispossessed, impoverished and

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frustrated young people are increasingly being lured by Islamist terrorist and criminal networks (in Africa)", while on the other hand, particularly in Iran, "a growing number of Muslims identify themselves as non-observant or nonbelievers." The Reports registered increased persecution of Muslims, including by fellow Muslims: "Brutal persecution of Uyghurs persists in China. Muslims in India and Myanmar have also faced discrimination and persecution. Increasing incidents of intra-Muslim persecution were also reported between Sunni and Shi'a (Hazara in Afghanistan), between national and "foreign" Muslim interpretations as well as between dominant and so-called "deviant" forms of Islam (Ahmadi in Pakistan). The Jewish community in Western countries has fared no better, facing an increasing number of attacks since the lockdowns imposed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. **Societal control.** Anti-Semitic hate crimes reported in OSCE countries increased from 582 in 2019 to 1,367 in 2021. "Abductions, sexual violence, including sexual enslavement and forced religious conversion continued unabated and remained largely unpunished" in West Africa. In dozens of countries religious minority women and girls suffered especially from this form of violence." The findings of the ACN Report include "inflating numbers of faithful as a means of maintaining political power. In some cases, faith communities, seeking to preserve their political, religious, and social status, exaggerated numbers of faithful by giving misleading religious data when officially registering children, or by postponing population census indefinitely (Lebanon, India, Malaysia)." Fundamental freedoms are undermined by "increased scrutiny, including mass surveillance, impacted faith groups. In the West, social media was used to marginalise and target religious groups." In the West, social media played a major factor in the spread of "cancel culture" that evolved from (verbal) harassment of individuals, who for religious reasons take different views, to include legal threats and loss of job opportunities. Derogatory content about minority faiths was inserted into school textbooks in India and Pakistan, while the number of anti-conversion laws and re-conversion initiatives offering economic benefits to those who adhere to or return to the majority religion registered an increase in Asia and North Africa. **Positive aspects.** The Report indicates record participation in popular religious celebrations after the restrictions imposed as a result of Covid-19. After three years of suspension and restrictions in most regions of the world, the return of major religious feasts – public expressions of popular religiosity – attracted millions of faithful. Similarly, inter-religious dialogue initiatives have increased. Pope Francis and other Church leaders around the world expanded their outreach to other religious communities.

Daniele Rocchi