

## Written evidence from Aid to the Church in Need (FRB0008)

**How satisfactory was the recent independent review into the persecution of Christians overseas, in its scope and its execution; what has the FCO done to follow up on its conclusions and recommendations; and what are its implications for the FCO's work on FoRB?**

Friday, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2019

### Submission from Aid to the Church in Need

1. This is a submission from Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), a pontifical foundation (organisation) of the Catholic Church. Working in nearly 140 countries, ACN supports Christians who are persecuted, oppressed or in pastoral need. ACN was one of the NGOs which “provided seconded researchers to join the Secretariat team” for the review into the persecution of Christians overseas.<sup>1</sup> ACN staff worked on only “the first phase of the review” which involved “a comprehensive assessment and analysis of existing evidence of the contemporary persecution of, and other discrimination against Christians.”<sup>2</sup>

### Scope and execution

2. We would suggest that the report was right to focus on Christians rather than cover a wider range of religious groups.<sup>3</sup> Firstly, the review's project design called for “the experience of other religious groups in minority situations” to be included in the analysis of both regions and case studies, where this was relevant. In many cases, Christian persecution can be a bellwether for areas where other minority groups equally suffer oppression. For example, the increased number of attacks on Christians by nationalist groups in India is not an isolated phenomenon,<sup>4</sup> there is also a smaller but still significant number of attacks on the country's Muslim community.<sup>5</sup>

3. Secondly, many Christians in situations of persecution perceive that the international community is ignoring or paying scant attention to their plight, while there may be a focus on other groups. To give two examples: Members of Burma's predominantly Christian Kachin ethnic group – which have included murder, rape torture, and the use of Kachin civilians to clear areas with land mines<sup>6</sup> – feel politicians and the media have overlooked their plight while paying considerable attention to the problems facing the Muslim-majority Rohingya ethnic group.<sup>7</sup> In Pakistan's Punjab province, Christians feel the kidnapping and conversion of Christian girls is overlooked, while attention is paid to similar incidents involving Hindu girls,<sup>8</sup> even though the number of kidnapped Christians might be more than seven times higher.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop of Truro's Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians: Final Report and Recommendations, <https://christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/report/> (accessed 11<sup>th</sup> September 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Independent review of FCO support for persecuted Christians, commissioned by the Foreign Secretary: terms of reference, 8 February 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-foreign-and-commonwealth-office-support-for-persecuted-christians-terms-of-reference/independent-review-of-fco-support-for-persecuted-christians-commissioned-by-the-foreign-secretary-terms-of-reference> (accessed 11<sup>th</sup> September 2019).

<sup>3</sup> “Humanists call for review into Christian persecution to be broadened to other groups”, Humanists UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019 <https://humanism.org.uk/2019/02/17/humanists-call-for-review-into-christian-persecution-to-be-broadened-to-other-groups/> (accessed 11<sup>th</sup> September 2019).

<sup>4</sup> In India, there were 440 anti-Christian incidents in 2017 and 477 in 2018. See Aid to the Church in Need's forthcoming *Persecuted and Forgotten?* report, due to be published 24<sup>th</sup> October 2019.

<sup>5</sup> *Religious Freedom in the World, Executive Summary* (London: Aid to the Church on Need, 2018), p. 10. And indeed the satiation of India's Muslims was flagged up in the final report of the independent review in the Regional Focus on South Asia. See Bishop of Truro's Independent Review: Final Report and Recommendations, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> See Aid to the Church in Need's forthcoming *Persecuted and Forgotten?* report, due to be published 24<sup>th</sup> October 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Bishop of Truro's Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians: Final Report and Recommendations

<sup>8</sup> Despite the Birmingham University report *Forced Conversions & Forced Marriages In Sindh, Pakistan* noting that “Abductions and forced conversions is an issue faced by all of the minority religions across Pakistan, but in particular, is the most serious problem facing Hindu and Christian women and girls”, there are only four references to Christians in the text (in three references they are paired with Hindus as above ) compared with 37 references to Hindus.

4. Looking at religious freedom violations as a whole, the specific targeting of Christians is sufficiently serious to warrant particular attention. Although measuring global persecution of any religious group is complicated by the multiple and variable factors involved, respected studies have repeatedly shown persecution of Christians to be among the worst – if not the single worst. The Pew Research Center showed that in 2016 Christians suffered harassment in 144 countries, making them the most harassed religious community by this measure, just ahead of Islam.<sup>10</sup> NGO Open Doors indicated that in 2018, 245 million Christians experienced serious persecution in 50 countries.<sup>11</sup>

#### **What has the FCO done to follow up**

5. Staff from the FCO have contacted ACN and organisations working on the ground with Christians who have experienced persecution. All the evidence suggests to us that the FCO is taking appropriate steps to ensure that the recommendations are properly implemented.

#### **What are its implications for the FCO's work on FoRB**

6. The report's findings pointed to a lack of religious literacy among civil servants, overseas Posts and Home Office staff dealing with asylum cases. Members of ACN staff seconded to the Bishop of Truro's report described being horrified by the poor levels of religious literacy demonstrated in some of the Posts' responses to the regional overviews and case studies. While ACN has been encouraged by recent steps to strengthen religious literacy such as the revised FCO FoRB Tool Kit, the whole process of the review has highlighted the need to redouble efforts in this area, as reflected in recommendation 11 of the report.<sup>12</sup> Unless robust and appropriate and accurate training in FoRB is provided – including a basic understanding of the religious traditions in the countries Posts are working in – the FCO will not be able to appropriately and sensitively address the existing lacunas.

7. The terms of reference called for the report to “Identify countries of most concern”<sup>13</sup> and indeed the final report referred to the “particularly egregious situation facing Christians in the Middle East” calling for the UK to advance a UN resolution to enhance protection for Christians and other minorities in the Middle East”.<sup>14</sup> Yet the terms of reference also asked “whether the FCO offers appropriate and proportionate support for Christians”.<sup>15</sup> Despite a number of meetings with Iraqi Chaldean Church leaders both in Iraq and in the UK since Daesh seized the Nineveh Plains in 2014, representatives of the Church have been critical of the lack of support provided whether at political level or in practical terms.<sup>16</sup> We would therefore conclude both that the nature of the crisis in the Middle East facing historic religious groups has not been taken seriously enough by the FCO or other UK government bodies. In August 2019 Archbishop Basha Warda of Erbil described Christians in Iraq as “perilously close to extinction”<sup>17</sup> – and that more joined up thinking is needed across HMG to ensure that humanitarian help can be provided alongside diplomatic engagement.

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<sup>9</sup> Movement for Solidarity and Peace, *Report on Forced Marriages & Forced Conversions In the Christian Community of Pakistan*, 2014, p. 2. It should be noted that 700 is the higher estimate, and that claims in the media suggesting that “more than 700” girls are kidnapped every year may not be substantiatable.

<sup>10</sup> Kishi, K., ‘Key findings on the global rise in religious restrictions’, Pew Research Center, 21 June 2018

[<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/06/21/key-findings-on-the-global-rise-in-religious-restrictions/>] accessed 13 March 2019.

<sup>11</sup> See Rees, M., *Paying the price twice: how religious persecution exacerbates the vulnerabilities of marginalised groups*, World Watch List report 2019, Open Doors, 2019, p.3.

<sup>12</sup> Bishop of Truro's Independent Review: Final Report and Recommendations, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> Independent review, terms of reference, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> Bishop of Truro's Independent Review: Final Report and Recommendations, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Independent review, terms of reference, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Communication between the Chaldean Archiepiscopal see of Erbil and Aid to the Church in Need.

<sup>17</sup> Archbishop Warda added: “In the years prior to 2003, we numbered as many as one-and-a-half million – six percent of Iraq's population. Today, there are perhaps as few as 250,000 of us left. Maybe less.” John Newton, “Iraq: Christians ‘close to extinction’”, Aid to the Church in

September 2019