

## Today Marks the First Ever International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence based on Religion or Belief

**Toronto, Canada, August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019-** In May, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly passed\* a resolution designating August 22<sup>nd</sup> as the **International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief**.

The resolution, [A/RES/3/296](#), reaffirms the universal right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and the need for states to promote and protect that freedom. It also condemns all acts of terrorism and violent extremism based on religion or belief.

Open Doors Canada hopes this day will prompt the international community to work towards ending religious-based violence and encourage governments around the world to truly uphold and defend the rights of all people to freedom of religion or belief.

Open Doors Canada's Executive Director, Gary Stagg, states, "today we pause to remember those who are marginalized and suffer unspeakable pain because they practice the "wrong" religion or have chosen to believe differently from the cultural rule. At the same time, we celebrate societies where freedom of religion and belief are upheld and where people flourish in a climate of mutual respect and care."

### Religious-Based Violence on the Rise

The UN acknowledges that [acts of intolerance and violence based on religion or belief are increasing](#).

The persecution of Christians globally is also increasing. Open Doors' World Watch research, which examines global persecution of Christians, estimates that more than 245 million Christians experience high levels of persecution, a number which has increased from 215 million the previous year.

The Open Doors 2019 World Watch List, which ranks the 50 countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian, reported that more than 4,100 Christians in those top 50 countries were killed for faith-related reasons. More than 3,700 Christians were killed in northern and central Nigeria alone, which is almost double the number of killings in Nigeria from the 2018 World Watch List.

The extremist group Boko Haram continues to be a threat for Nigerians in the north of the country. The group uses abduction and forced marriage as common tactics. Esther (name changed to protect her identity) was kidnapped by Boko Haram in 2015 and held captive until the Nigerian military rescued her in November 2016. During her time in captivity, Esther was repeatedly raped by many men and impregnated. As a returnee, the stigma attached to her kidnapping and pregnancy has made reintegration into her community difficult as many are unwilling to welcome back what they refer to as "Boko Haram women".

In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party, the BJP, have secured a second term in a massive victory in the recent general elections in India. In the past there has been little, if any, protection against attacks on religious minorities from the state authorities. Prime Minister Modi's administration refuses to speak out against this violence, which results in a constant increase in the level of impunity.

2019 has already been a year rife with religious-based violence against individuals and minority groups. In Sri Lanka, attacks on three churches this past Easter killed more than 250 people; 176

children lost one or both parents; some families lost all their children. Earlier this year, bombers killed 20 people gathered at a church in southern Philippines.

### **The Need for Action and Prayer**

We at Open Doors mark this first International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence based on Religion or Belief by reaffirming the need for governments around the world to condemn and work towards ending religious-based violence and to protect freedom of religion for all. We also pause to honour all victims and pray for our dear brothers and sisters who are victims of violence because of what they believe.

Note to Editors:

\*The Resolution was tabled by Poland and the US and supported by the General Assembly core group of Brazil, Canada, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria, and Pakistan.

<https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/ga12147.doc.htm>

The August 22<sup>nd</sup> commemoration's focus is limited to violence based on religion or belief, rather than the broader concept of religious persecution which may include "[intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights](#)" (highly likely because "religious persecution" is not being defined unequivocally; some definitions are very broad). The focus on acts of violence intends to send a very clear message that no act of violence is acceptable, whether a single incident or acts of violence that are systematic and perpetrated on a mass scale.

For more information on Open Doors' World Watch research, methodology and the 2019 Top 50 list, please visit <https://www.opendoorsca.org/world-watch-list/country-profiles/>

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