Around the world, harassed Christians are killed for their beliefs

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Christian minorities around the world are being harassed and killed for their beliefs despite international laws protecting religious freedom and American efforts to punish persecutors, The Oregonian reported in a series of stories.

In Pakistan, Noor Alam, a Presbyterian pastor who built the first Christian church in his region, was stabbed to death in his home last January.

In Egypt, a Muslim who converted to Christianity was arrested by secret police and tortured.

Mustapha el-Sharkawy told the newspaper his interrogators wanted him to inform about other converts.

In Sudan, soldiers sent a 15-year-old Roman Catholic boy into slavery, where he said he was given an Islamic name and beaten by his master's wives.

Sudanese Roman Catholic Bishop Marcus Gassis said the incident revealed a wider problem, one that he became aware of when he saw the bruised hands and feet of a lay religious leader.

"He was crucified for 24 hours," Gassis said. "He was not nailed but tied to a pole in the form of a cross. He was denied food, denied water and beaten with the butt of a gun." The issue reached Congress this year in a bill that passed with the backing of a wide range of religious groups. President Clinton has said he will sign it.

It penalizes countries that persecute based on religious beliefs, and authorizes economic sanctions if necessary. Although the bill covers all religions, the focus is on Christianity. But this is a complex problem with no easy answers.

Egypt, for example, is a staunch American ally and the second-largest recipient of U.S. aid, after Israel. In Sudan and Myanmar, formerly Burma, religious persecution has been used as an instrument of war. In Pakistan, it's intermingled with social tensions and a perception that Christianity is the oppressive religion of the West.

Some governments fear Christianity inspires rebelliousness in the name of an invisible God considered more powerful than the state. Communist China sees religion less as a spiritual threat than as a political one. Still, many Chinese Christians said they are experiencing a golden age of religious freedom, as long as they abide by government controls.

Those who don't register with the Chinese government -- underground, mostly evangelical, Christians -- described lives as fugitives, moving from house to house to avoid arrest. They spoke of jail and torture with electric prods.

Citing the biblical message, "blessed are the persecuted," some called suffering redemptive.
"It's good for the church, like growing pains with children," said Allen Yuan, 84, a Chinese church leader who spent more than 21 years in a labor camp. Peasant pastors in China have a slogan: "Prison is our seminary."

It was a Jewish attorney in Washington, D.C., who turned persecution into a political issue.

Michael Horowitz said his awakening occurred in 1994, when he hired Geteneh Getanel, a Christian Ethiopian, to do housework. While trying unsuccessfully to evangelize Horowitz, Getanel recounted how he had boiling oil poured on the soles of his feet as he was whipped by metal cables.

Horowitz eventually wrote to 143 missionary organizations across the country, saying he was "pained and puzzled" about their relative lack of interest in persecuted Christians. "What struck me is how Christian leaders were so intimidated in speaking out on behalf of their own," he said. "It was a fear that if they did that they would be reminded of all the sins that have historically been made in the name of Christianity. But I challenged them. I said, 'Would you be willing to speak of your own virtue instead of just your own sins?'

Horowitz argued that if the United States doesn't act, Christians will become "the scapegoats of choice of the world's thug regimes."


"It's being seen the same way as we would see military security and economic contracts," said Robert Seiple, whom President Clinton appointed to a new position as the representative of the secretary of state for international religious freedom.

The bill passed by Congress does not define persecution, but addresses "violations of religious freedom."

It affirms Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The declaration, unanimously approved by the United Nations in 1948, said: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom ... to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance."

Churches, meanwhile, have begun spotlighting persecution.

In 1996, about 5,000 churches chose the same day to pray for Christians under attack. Last year, 50,000 churches participated, and on Nov. 15 more than 100,000 churches from 130 countries are expected to commemorate The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.

Despite the support, Asma Jehangir, chairwoman of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, said things are getting worse for Christians.

"They are just surviving," she said. "Incidents are increasing. Insecurities are increasing. You have legislation that is discriminatory. You have court judgments that are biased. It's not just that people are socially discriminated against now," she said. "It's persecution."

The Oregonian series, the result of a nine-month, five-country investigation, ran Oct. 25-29.