Christian persecution widespread, complex
As Congress elevates worldwide religious freedom into a foreign policy mandate, an investigation by The Oregonian reveals that persecution runs rampant

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Today we begin a five-day series that reveals and puts into context the persecution of Christians around the globe. Even though the issue has prompted new legislation mandating a shift in U.S. foreign policy, no other newspaper has examined it in such depth. The Oregonian's investigation reveals how such critical issues, even a world away, matter to our readers.

A Presbyterian pastor overlooks threats and builds the first Christian church in his region of Pakistan. A mob destroys the church. Masked men invade the pastor's home and stab him to death.

A man leaves Islam to become a Christian. Egyptian secret police arrest him without a formal charge and torture him with an electric probe to make him inform them about other converts.

A Roman Catholic boy in southern Sudan plays in the trees with his friends. Soldiers waging a holy war capture him and send him into slavery, where he is given an Islamic name and beaten with sticks by his master's wives.

From Bosnian Muslims to Soviet Jews to Buddhists in Tibet, Americans have long been concerned about the rights of religious minorities around the world. Only recently have Christians been added to that list.

In the United States, where more than 80 percent of Americans identify themselves as Christians, the First Amendment right to freedom of religion is so firmly entrenched it's often taken for granted. But although this freedom is hailed in other countries, it isn't always practiced.

In recent years, an increasingly active coalition led by evangelical Christians, human rights organizations and Jewish opinion leaders has brought to light the plight of Christians in countries where they are vulnerable minorities.

Through books, videos, sermons, prayer circles and Internet discussion groups, this loosely bound group has been alleging that in dozens of countries
throughout the world, Christians are increasingly victims of abuse, violence and discrimination because of their faith. They call it persecution.

The issue made its way to the U.S. Congress this year with a proposed bill that initially pitted evangelical organizations against mainstream Protestant churches and social conservatives against a pro-business lobby.

But in the end, after five months of wrangling, a bill emerged backed by a wide range of liberal and conservative religious groups, from the Christian Coalition to the Episcopal Church and the American Jewish Committee. The bill penalizes nations that persecute based on religious beliefs. Although the bill covers freedom of all religions, the focus is clearly on Christianity. When a pattern of persecution persists, the bill forces the president to take action.

Although the sweep of possible redress is wide -- ranging from a mere private diplomatic protest to severe economic sanctions -- advocacy of religious freedom is now a foreign policy mandate. The final version of the legislation passed 98-0 in the Senate and with an overwhelming voice vote in the House; still, little public attention has been given to the Christians abroad who will supposedly benefit.

Are they indeed persecuted? If so, why? And what can -- or should -- be done to help them? To find the answer to these and other questions, The Oregonian embarked on a nine-month, five-country investigation that revealed ample evidence of persecution.

Around the world, Christians are being tortured, beaten, raped, imprisoned, enslaved, forced out of their homes and killed -- in large part because of what they believe. There are also Christians clinging to their faith in countries where laws are stacked against them and their beliefs. Yet they continue to praise and worship their God in the midst of extreme hardship. Religious intolerance reflects war, politics and social tensions. Still, Christian persecution is much more complicated than it first appears. It is rarely an issue of people suffering solely for their faith, as portrayed in emotion-charged videos and fund-raising letters.

Instead, victims are often caught in a nexus of social and political as well as religious currents. Around the globe, the persecution of religious minorities -- including Christians -- is an explosive, yet often overlooked, force in world affairs, and an increasingly important human rights issue. In places such as Burma and
Sudan, religious persecution has become an instrument of war. In countries such as Egypt and Pakistan, it's intermingled with social tensions and the perception that Christianity is the oppressive religion of the West.

In China, the Communist government sees Christianity not so much as a spiritual threat as a political one. Complicating that picture is the fact that many Chinese Christians say they are experiencing a golden age of religious freedom -- if they abide by the government's controls.

Governments fear Christianity will inspire uprising In many parts of the world, governments may have good reason to fear Christianity. History proves that it can inspire followers to acts of bravery, and sometimes rebellion, in the name of an invisible God who is seen as more powerful than the state.

With its biblical stories of first-century martyrs and beatitudes saying "blessed are those who are persecuted," some see a Christian philosophy that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. In China, for example, Christians view persecution as a spiritual merit badge and a precursor for church growth.

"It's good for the church, like growing pains with children," says Allen Yuan, 84, a Chinese underground church leader who spent 21 years and eight months in a labor camp.

Peasant Chinese pastors have developed a slogan: "Prison is our seminary." Before it became a political issue in the United States, the mandate to find solidarity with suffering Christians was primarily a spiritual matter.

Voice of the Martyrs, an Oklahoma-based organization, has been focusing on persecution since 1967. It emphasizes biblical passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:26, which tells Christians to care for one another as if they were all parts of the same body: "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it."

Voice of the Martyrs and similar groups, such as the California-based Open Doors, smuggled Bibles into foreign countries and, most of all, established "prayer alerts" for those they found in trouble.

Some religious groups say the Bible commands them to evangelize. The "Great Commission" in the gospel of Matthew commands believers to make disciples of "all nations."

Some even see evangelism and persecution as biblical signs that Christ will return soon. The 24th chapter of Matthew predicts the message will be
"preached in the whole world" and "you will be handed over to be persecuted to
death." This persecution is presented as a sign that the Second Coming of
Christ is imminent.

"A literal interpretation of that passage would say we're almost there," says Jim
Jacobson, head of Christian Solidarity International.

The turning point from a spiritual to political issue

It was a Jewish attorney and Washington, D.C., power broker who turned
persecution of Christians into a political issue. Michael Horowitz says his
awakening occurred in 1994, when he hired Geteneh Getanel, a Christian
Ethiopian, to live in his home and do housework.

The temporary domestic helper tried, unsuccessfully, to evangelize
Horowitz, who describes himself as a "traditional conservative Jew." But in the
process, Getanel recounted how he had been imprisoned for preaching in
Africa, then tortured by having boiling oil poured on the soles of his feet as he
was whipped by metal cables.

Horowitz found an issue to champion. From 1981 to 1985, he had served as the
Reagan administration's general counsel for the Office of Management and
Budget. He then went on to become a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, a
nonprofit think tank that analyzes public policy issues.

He knew how to make things happen. Horowitz fired off letters to 143
missionary organizations across the country, saying he was "pained and
puzzled" about their relative lack of interest in coming to the aid of fellow
persecuted Christians around the world.

"What struck me," Horowitz says now, "is how Christian leaders were so
intimidated in speaking out on behalf of their own. It was a fear that if they did
that they would be reminded of all the sins that have been 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?'"

It worked.

In 1996, Horowitz drafted "A Statement of Conscience," which was adopted by
the National Association of Evangelicals and the Southern Baptist Convention,
the country's largest Protestant denomination. That and similar efforts laid the foundation for the bill Congress passed earlier this month.

A Jew had awakened American Christians to fight for their brethren in the Middle East and other parts of the world. Horowitz argues that if the United States fails to take decisive action, Christians will become "the Jews of the 21st century, the scapegoats of choice of the world's thug regimes."

**Muslims fear stereotyping in American movement**

The Jewish connection has not been lost in Muslim countries, where the American movement is often seen as a deceptive strategy to tarnish Israel's enemies. An April 15 article in Al-Ahram, Egypt's largest and most influential newspaper, criticized human rights activist Nina Shea, author Paul (the article called him George) Marshall and A.M. Rosenthal, a New York Times columnist and friend of Horowitz, all of whom wrote about persecution.

The article accused all three of being "American Jews known to be Zionists." Rosenthal says anyone who sees the movement as a Zionist plot is "either too prejudiced, too stupid or too impregnated with propaganda for me to waste my time with them."

Shea is Catholic.

Marshall, a Canadian, says "I'm not an American. I'm not a Jew, I'm not a Zionist, and my name isn't George."

Still, the theory has its supporters in the United States, including John Esposito, director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. The movement is "an excuse," Esposito says, "for Muslim bashing."

In focusing on problems in Muslim countries, some American Muslims are concerned the movement will unfairly tarnish their entire religion and make their life more difficult. "We're heading in a direction of saying Islam as a faith is what we have to fear," says Faiz Rehman, editor of the California-based Pakistan Link newspaper.

"We have a double standard. If a Christian country does something wrong, we don't blame Christianity. We dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. Was that a Christian bomb? Absolutely not. But it came from a Christian country, or at least a country where Christianity is the predominant faith."
With the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union, some allege that the "religious right" has created a new enemy. "It's the new anti-communism for them," says the Rev. Albert M. Pennybacker, associate general secretary of the nation's largest ecumenical group, the National Council of Churches of Christ.

Horowitz scoffs at such accusations, saying the movement is broad-based and inclusive of all religions, while despising none. He adds, however, that the history of Jews gives him a sympathetic perspective.

"The treatment of these evangelicals echoes, almost to a T, what happened in Germany under Hitler," Horowitz says. "You can almost hear people saying, 'Gee, they are sort of odd and zealous. I wouldn't want them as my neighbor, either. If they are being persecuted, they sort of brought it on themselves.' That is exactly what was said about Jews in the 1920s and 1930s at the Washington dinner parties."

**Religious freedom joins military, economic issues in foreign policy**

Advocacy of religious freedom is now a foreign policy mandate. "It's being seen the same way as we would see military security and economic contracts as part of our foreign policy," says Robert Seiple, whom President Clinton appointed this year to fill a new position as the representative of the secretary of state for international religious freedom.

Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va., who drafted an earlier version of the bill, says the legislation, which President Clinton has promised to sign, sends "a message of hope" to millions of people abroad. He says its power lies in creating a permanent mechanism requiring the State Department to focus on persecution in annual reports. In addition, a nine-member bipartisan commission, with appointments from Congress, will provide an outside, independent voice analyzing persecution.

Taken together, Wolf expects the State Department reports and commission recommendations to keep persecution in the public spotlight for years to come. Wolf is convinced having the world's superpower keep a watchful eye on persecution will be enough to prompt some countries to reform. The bill does not define the word "persecution," as the earlier House version did. Instead, it addresses "violations of religious freedom."

It affirms Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, unanimously approved 50 years ago by the United Nations. Despite protests by
some Asian and Muslim nations that the declaration reflects a Western bias and chauvinism, it is still regarded as the international gold standard for religious freedom.

The 1948 declaration says: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance."

The bill breaks violations into two categories. The first addresses restrictions on assembling for peaceful religious activities, speaking about beliefs, changing beliefs, possessing Bibles and other religious literature and raising children in the faith of their parents. It includes religiously motivated detention, interrogation, forced labor, forced mass resettlement, imprisonment, forced religious conversion, beating, torture, mutilation, rape, enslavement, murder and execution.

When a report singles out a nation for such violations, the president will determine the punishment.

If violations are "systematic, ongoing and egregious," they fall into a second, severe category that merits economic sanctions, including U.S. opposition to loans by international financial institutions.

The president can waive sanctions for national interests or if he thinks they may create a backlash against religious minorities.

**Congregations unite to pray for their persecuted brethren**

While the bill creates an ongoing foreign policy initiative, churches have intensified their effort to highlight the persecution and pray for its end.

In 1996, about 5,000 churches set aside the same day to pray for their "brothers and sisters" under attack. Last year, about 50,000 churches did the same thing. This Nov. 15, more than 100,000 churches from 130 countries are expected to commemorate The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.

Although the movement counts the number of churches in prayer, it has difficulty quantifying the extent of the suffering. The closest anyone has gotten is David Barrett, a professor of missions at Regent University, an evangelical
graduate school in Virginia Beach, Va., who has been studying the issue for 35 years, charting the history of persecution.

He agrees it's a significant problem while debunking the widely repeated assertion that the number of people persecuted is at an all-time high. The peak, he says, occurred during the Soviet Union's era of communist expansion.

That, however, is no consolation to Christians such as Mustapha el-Sharkawy, who spent 10 months in an Egyptian prison after he converted to Christianity.

"There is persecution," Sharkawy says. "You should not exaggerate it, as some people do. You should also not deny it, as some people do."