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Testimony of John L. Allen Jr.
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Dispatches from the Front Lines of Anti-Christian Persecution*
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing on what I regard as the premier human rights issue of the early 21st century, as well as the most untold story about global Christianity in our time. I speak today as a journalist, not an advocate or a victim of persecution, and my primary concern is making sure the story of anti-Christian persecution is accurately presented and understood.

Let's begin with an overview of the global situation.

There are an estimated 2.3 billion Christians in the world today, some two-thirds of whom live outside the West. That makes Christianity the largest religious tradition on the planet, representing one-third of the human population. The zones of Christianity's greatest expansion are in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia. While the overall Christian population of Latin America has remained fairly constant, there has been tremendous movement from the majority Catholic tradition to Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Although the traditional Arab Christian population of the Middle East is in decline, there has been striking Christian growth in the Gulf States among expatriates drawn to work in the oil and domestic service industries. Note that Christianity's expansion is thus occurring primarily in neighborhoods not always distinguished by a robust respect for religious freedom, which is one factor fueling what I've described as the "global war" on Christians.

The high-end estimate for the number of Christians killed for their faith every year in the early 21st century is 100,000, a number that comes from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, a Protestant institution with its main campus in Hamilton, Massachusetts. Thomas Schirrmacher of the World Evangelical Alliance considers an estimate of 20 fatalities per day more realistic, which adds up to 7,300 a year. American scholar Rodney Stark offers a lower estimate still, suggesting that pegging the total at a few hundred such deaths a year is probably the most realistic figure. The truth of the matter is that because motives for violence are often complex, and because it's difficult to get independent observers on the ground in the most intense killing zones, the exact body count is impossible to establish. Note well, however, that the low-end estimate pegs the number of victims at one per day, while the high-end puts it at one per hour. Note, too, that the threats are not confined to any one region or any one protagonist, but are global in scope and complex in origin.

There are other several indices of the threats facing Christians. The Pew Forum found that Christians suffered some form of harassment, either *de jure* or *de facto*, in 139 countries between 2006 and 2010, the largest total for any religious group. The finding means that Christians are at-risk in two-thirds of all nations on earth. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has found that of the sixteen worst offender states in terms of violations of religious freedom, Christians are the only religious community at risk in all sixteen. The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism found that between 2003 and 2011, terroristic attacks on Christians around the world jumped by 139 percent. The Evangelical advocacy and relief organization "Open Doors" that roughly 100 million Christians today suffer interrogation, arrest, and even death for their faith, with the bulk located in Asia and the Middle East.

Consider these snapshots of what's happening around the world:

- In Baghdad, Iraq, Islamic militants stormed the Syriac Catholic cathedral of Our Lady of Salvation on Oct. 31, 2010, killing the two priests celebrating Mass and leaving a total of 58 people dead. Though shocking, the assault was far from unprecedented; of the 65 Christian churches in Baghdad, 40 have been bombed at least once since the beginning of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. The effect of this campaign of violence and intimidation has been devastating for Christianity in the country. At the time of the first Gulf War in 1991, Iraq boasted a flourishing Christian population of at least 1.5 million. Today the high-end estimate for the number of Christians left is around 500,000, and realistically many believe it could be as low as 150,000.
- India's northeastern state of Orissa was the scene of the most violent anti-Christian pogrom of the early 21st century. In 2008, a series of riots ended with as many as 500 Christians killed, many hacked to death by machete-wielding Hindu radicals, and thousands more injured and at least 50,000 left homeless. Many Christians fled to hastily prepared displacement camps, where some languished for two years or more. An estimated 5,000 Christian homes, along with 350 churches and schools, were destroyed. A Catholic nun, Sr. Meena Barwa, was raped during the mayhem, then marched naked and beaten. Police sympathetic to the radicals discouraged the nun from filing a report, and declined to arrest her attackers. The Orissa pogrom is merely the most spectacular instance of widespread anti-Christian violence. An investigation by a high court judge in Karnataka state in March 2010 found that Christians had faced more than 1,000 attacks in the past 500 days, meaning an average of two per day.

- In Burma, members of the Chin and Karen ethnic groups, who are strongly Christian, are considered dissidents by the regime and subjected to imprisonment, torture, forced labor, and murder. In October 2010, the Burmese military launched helicopter strikes in territories where Christians are concentrated. A Burmese Air Force source told reporters that the junta had declared these areas “black zones,” where military personnel were authorized to attack and kill Christian targets on sight. Though there are no precise counts, thousands of Burmese Christians are believed to have been killed in the offensive.
- In Nigeria, the militant Islamic movement “Boko Haram” is held responsible for almost 3,000 deaths since 2009. The movement has made a specialty out of targeting Christians and their churches, and has tried to drive Christians out altogether from parts of the country. In December 2011, Boko Haram spokespersons announced that all Christians in the northern Yobe and Borno states had three days to get out, and followed up with a spate of church bombings on January 5-6, 2012, which left at least 26 Christians dead, as well as two shooting sprees in which eight more Christians died. In the aftermath, hundreds of Christians fled and many are still displaced. Over Christmas 2012, at least fifteen Christians had their throats cut by Boko Haram assailants.
- North Korea is widely considered the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian, where roughly a quarter of the country’s 200,000 to 400,000 Christians are believed to be living in forced labor camps for their refusal to join the national cult around founder Kim Il Sung. The anti-Christian animus is so strong that even people with Christian grandparents are frozen out of the most important jobs. Since the armistice in 1953 that stabilized the division of the peninsula, some 300,000 Christians in North Korea have simply disappeared and are presumed to be dead.

To conclude, I'd like briefly to ponder the question of why this global war on Christians is often wrapped in a blanket of silence, not only by the secular media but even within Christian churches themselves. In a word, I believe we have a problem of narrative.

Ordinary people in the West are conditioned to see Christianity as the agent of repression, not its victim. Say "religious persecution" to most Westerners, and the images that come to mind are the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Wars of Religion, Bruno and Savonarola, the Salem witch trials – chapters of history in which Christianity is cast as the villain. The fact that this narrative is badly out of date has done little to reduce its hold on the Western imagination. The truth is that the typical Christian in today's world is not an affluent American male pulling up to church in a Lincoln Continental; it's a poor black woman and mother of four in Botswana, or a poor Dalit grandmother in Orissa.

Here's the reality of the early 21st century. Projections are that the share of the Christian population living in the developing world will reach three-quarters by mid-century. These Christians often carry a double or triple stigma, representing not only a faith that arouses suspicion but also an oppressed ethnic group (like the Karen or Chin in Burma) or social class (such as Dalit converts in India, who may be as much as 60 percent of the country's Christian population). They're also targets of convenience for anyone with a grievance against the West, who often perceive these Christians as beachheads of Western influence despite the fact in many instances that Christianity actually has deep indigenous roots in that society. Christians may feel a special concern for these suffering coreligionists, but it requires no religious faith at all to recognize this as a menace to human rights that ought to concern everyone.

To the extent that today's hearing can help change the narrative, Mr. Chairman, we are all in your debt.