

Dear Lord Ahmad,

COVID-19 Effect on the Situation of Religious Minorities

We write regarding the situation of religious minorities around the world, which has deteriorated due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Persecution of religious minorities is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, religious minorities have long been subjected to acts of intimidation, discrimination, harassment, marginalisation, and violence, with such acts varying in their severity and frequency. However, recent months have seen new trends developing that are closely related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As Sam Brownback, US Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, has identified, at least five specific COVID-19 related trends are emerging. Firstly, some governments are using the pandemic to further repress religious minorities. Secondly, religious minorities are often being discriminated against in the provision of food aid and healthcare. Thirdly, some religious minorities are being blamed for the spread of COVID-19 and targeted as a result. Fourthly, online propaganda campaigns are targeting religious minorities, spreading misinformation and inciting violence. Fifthly, technology is being misused to further repress, discriminate, or surveil religious minorities. Among others:

In China, many Uyghurs and members of other Muslim-majority ethnic groups who were moved from the so-called 're-education camps' are subjected to forced labour, including forced transfer to other cities and regions, exposing them to the threat of contracting COVID-19.

In Myanmar, Rohingya Muslims and Kachin Christians are displaced as a result of military attacks involving mass atrocities and are often denied access to adequate medical care both as a consequence of their displacement and as a result of restrictions on movement and other basic freedoms.

In Nigeria, heavily-armed men of Fulani ethnicity specifically target religious minority communities in central Nigeria and are taking advantage of COVID-19 lockdowns to intensify attacks on villages, killing or driving out inhabitants, and looting the areas.

Similarly, in Iraq, Daesh, the terror group that unleashed genocide against Yazidis, Christians, and other religious minorities, is once more growing in power and is posing a renewed threat to religious minorities.

In India, Muslims are blamed for the spread of COVID-19 and are being targeted further as a result.

In Pakistan, several incidents have been reported of Christians and Hindus being denied food aid packages. Additionally, frontline sanitary workers, who are predominantly from the Christian community, are at increased risk of contracting COVID-19 as they are not equipped with protective gear. In addition, Pakistan's failure to create an autonomous National Commission for Minorities through an Act of Parliament raises serious questions regarding whether the concerns of minorities will be fairly addressed. The composition of the new mechanism is arbitrary: religious minorities are insufficiently represented; Ahmadis are excluded entirely, and it does not have the independence which would enable it to function effectively as a watchdog.

It is clear from these examples that COVID-19 is adding to the pressures already felt by religious minorities, is making them more vulnerable, and their situation even more challenging. Further details on the specific instances of how COVID-19 is affecting religious minorities can be found on the IDS blog created to monitor the situation around the world, or from the websites of signatories to this letter.

These violations require a comprehensive response that not only assists with the urgent needs of the affected communities but also addresses the pre-existing situation of religious minorities.

We are therefore calling on the UK Government to create a special budget to assist religious minorities uniquely affected by COVID-19. We further call on the UK Government to engage in dialogues with governments of countries where COVID-19-related violations of freedom of religion or belief are occurring and seek their assurances that they will address these violations, including thorough investigations and prosecutions of perpetrators.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Lord Alton of Liverpool

Baroness Cox of Queensbury

Jim Shannon MP

His Eminence Archbishop Angaelos, Coptic Orthodox Archbishop of London

Bishop Philip Mounstephen, Bishop of Truro

Lord Bishop of Coventry

Jessica Giles, Open University, Director of the Project on Interdisciplinary Law and Religion Studies

Professor Javaid Rehman, Senior Consultant with APPG on Pakistani Minorities

Institute of Development Studies

Aid to the Church in Need (UK)

Christian Solidarity Worldwide

Coalition for Genocide Response

Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development

Coptic Office for Advocacy and Public Policy