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December 12, 2022

His Holiness Pope Francis
The Apostolic Palace
00120 Vatican City

Your Holiness:

We request your immediate action to condemn the ongoing extreme persecution of over 360 million Christians in at least 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a believer.

We make this appeal through *Save the Persecuted Christians (STPC)*—a non-profit educational non-profit coalition representing some 200 non-governmental organizations who have come together for the purpose of registered saving lives and saving souls. We educate the public on anti-Christian violence and enlist their help in: supporting those harmed for their faith in Jesus; holding those responsible accountable; and securing significant penalties on state and non-state persecutors of Christians.

The urgency of this appeal cannot be overstated as the world witnesses a massive, and intensifying, surge of Christian persecution by governments and terrorist groups.

Open Doors USA's 2022 World Watch List—the most in-depth investigative report focusing on global Christian persecution available—reveals that from October 2020 to September 2021, the number of Christians abducted, arrested and killed increased sharply. Its calculation that more than the number of men, women and children in the United States at the moment are being heavily persecuted represents a horrifying increase of roughly 60 percent since 2018. According to the report, **16 Christians worldwide are murdered every day simply for following Jesus.**

As one of the world's preeminent moral leaders, your voice and leadership are desperately needed to raise awareness about, to condemn, and to inspire the imposition of costs for the ongoing persecution of Christians, and to a lesser degree other religious minorities around the world.

STPC seeks your expeditious diplomatic and public intervention on behalf of our Christian brothers and sisters in the following countries:

CHINA

Since September 22, 2018, when the Vatican-China pact was first executed, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has engaged in a strategic campaign of destruction of Catholic and Christian churches, orphanages, worship houses, and schools. In fact, the secret deal could be said to have triggered a brutal *surge* in religious persecution against Catholics and Christians. Your predecessor, Pope Pius XII correctly understood the deception and invalidity of the Chinese Patriotic Association in his 1958 Encyclical *Ad Apostolorum Principis*:

“For under an appearance of patriotism, which in reality is just a fraud, this association aims primarily at making Catholics gradually embrace the tenets of atheistic materialism, by which God Himself is denied and religious principles are rejected.”

Understandably, a number of Catholic bishops and priests refuse to join the Patriotic Church, despite urging by the Vatican. Consequently, they are subject to ongoing harassment, arrest, detention and imprisonment by the Communist Chinese Party.

The Open Doors USA Report described state persecution of Christians by the atheistic Chinese Communist government:

“Surveillance in China is among the most oppressive and sophisticated in the world. Church attendance is rigorously monitored, and many churches are being closed down—whether they are independent or belong to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (the officially state-sanctioned Protestant church in China). It remains illegal for children under 18 years of age to attend church. All meeting venues had to close during the COVID-19 crisis, but some churches were forced to remain closed once restrictions began to lift, and were quietly phased out.”

Despite having twice renewed the secret agreement with China, the Vatican has remained publicly silent over the illegal arrest and detention of the following persecuted Catholic bishops:

Cardinal Joseph Zen

Cardinal Zen is the most senior Chinese prelate ever arrested by the CCP. On May 11, the 90-year-old Cardinal Zen was arrested by security police on accusations of “conspiracy to collude with foreign forces,” under Hong Kong’s sweeping national-security law. While that investigation continues, he was convicted on charges that, as a trustee, he and five others failed to register a now-defunct aid fund for pro-democracy protestors. His legal and personal status remains very tenuous.

Bishop Vincent Guo Xijin

In January 2020, as Covid spread, Chinese authorities evicted Bishop Guo from his home, forcing the then-61-year-old prelate to sleep on his church’s doorstep. After international pressure, he was allowed access to his apartment, only to find that its heat, water, and electricity were shut off. Thwarted in his episcopal ministry, he resigned and returned to his family’s village.

Bishop Julius Jia Zhiguo, of Zhengding

Bishop Zhiguo was sequestered for indoctrination on August 10, 2020, and subsequently disappeared. He defied recent regime directives to ban children from church and for 30 years had run an orphanage for disabled children. He had spent decades in prison and under house arrest with tight surveillance. Internet reports that he has died have not been confirmed.

Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin

The 59-year-old bishop of Yongjia (Wenzhou) diocese, Zhejiang province. Bishop Shah Zhumin has been detained in secret locations six times since 2016, including between October 25 and an unknown date in November 2021. He reportedly was detained again on April 7, 2022, and forced onto a flight to an unknown destination.

Bishop Melchior Shi Hongzhen

The 93-year-old bishop of Tianjin, is under house arrest and has been for several years. In September 2022, a Vatican delegation that arrived in Tianjin to negotiate the renewal of the Vatican-China agreement *was* able to give him a pectoral cross from you. But, he should be immediately freed from this illegal government detention.

Bishop Augustine Cui Tai

Bishop Cui Tai disappeared following an arrest on June 19, 2020, after being freed from detention that January. The 72-year-old bishop had spent most of the last 15 years under house arrest or in secret detention without due process. The Vatican should demand his immediate release from detention.

Bishop James Su Zhimin

Bishop Zhimin is among today's longest serving political prisoners. While leading a religious procession in 1996, Bishop Su was taken into police custody and imprisoned without trial in 1997. Nothing has been learned about him since his illegal imprisonment. The Vatican's silence over this illegal imprisonment is very troubling.

Bishop Joseph Zhang Weizhu

Bishop Weizhu was arrested in May 2021 while convalescing from cancer surgery and detained without due process in a black jail. His arrest, along with that of ten priests and a number of seminarians, occurred during a raid by over 100 public-security officers on a former factory where the bishop ran a seminary for fellow conscientious objectors. While the others were released, the 63-year-old bishop remains detained in a secret location.

Religious and Laity

Countless other Catholic priests and laity have been similarly unjustly detained, prosecuted and imprisoned for exercising the right of religious freedom.

The Vatican should immediately and publicly demand the release and restoration of all such priests and laity detained and otherwise persecuted by the CCP. In the event that the government refuses or ignores the Vatican's demand, the Holy See should terminate the Vatican/China secret pact forthwith.

Christian leaders in China are generally the main target of government surveillance, and a number of them have been abducted. "*They are simply snatched away,*" says an Open Doors USA source, "*only to appear months later in a kind of house arrest, where they get re-educated.*"

Cardinal Zen and the Hong Kong Democracy and Religious Freedom Movement

Members of the largely Catholic-led democracy movement in Hong Kong have been the subject of ongoing legal harassment and imprisonment. Catholic leader Jimmy Lai remains imprisoned and faces additional charges by the Hong Kong government. Agnes Chow, Jacob Wong and many others are being persecuted for simply seeking religious freedom, freedom of speech and association.

As noted above, the former archbishop of Hong Kong, Cardinal Joseph Zen, was imprisoned after his unceremonious arrest by Chinese Communist Party officials in May. The 90-year-old cardinal, was arrested

with four other pro-democracy advocates. The five arrestees were convicted of the crime of not registering the charity with the government.

Religious freedom is precipitously disintegrating in the once thriving and free Hong Kong. The Vatican must speak out against the growing crackdown on religious freedom, among the last remnants of the territory's "one country, two systems" model. Unless the Chinese government relents, the Vatican pact with China effectively legitimates such persecution and must be terminated.

Forced Organ Harvesting

The PRC is widely alleged to be a major harvester and trafficker of organs acquired by force. Available information indicates that Falun Gong practitioners have been the primary victims of this cruel practice, and there are now allegations that imprisoned Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minorities are also victims, based in part on accounts of mandatory medical testing in Xinjiang consistent with preparation for organ removal.

The final judgment of the **Independent Tribunal into Forced Organ Harvesting from Prisoners of Conscience in China Tribunal**, published in March 2020, concluded that forced organ harvesting from prisoners of conscience has been practiced for a substantial period of time involving a very substantial number of victims.

On June 14, 2021, 12 United Nations Special Procedures mandate holders said they were "extremely alarmed by reports of alleged 'organ harvesting' targeting minorities, including Falun Gong practitioners, Uyghurs, Tibetans, Muslims and Christians, in detention in China, and called upon the PRC government to *allow independent monitoring by international human rights mechanisms.*"

Uyghur Persecution

Uyghur people living in Xinjiang province (a.k.a. East Turkistan) are being subjected to unconscionable crimes against humanity directed by the Chinese state government that amount to acts of genocide, the Independent Tribunal has also found.

Hundreds of thousands of people -- and possibly as many as a million, have been incarcerated without any or remotely fair justification, the Tribunal's chair, Sir Geoffrey Nice QC, said as he delivered the panel's findings in London. "*This vast apparatus of state repression could not exist if a plan was not authorized at the highest levels,*" Nice said.

Other CCP crimes against humanity in East Turkestan include: hundreds of thousands of Uyghur children being stolen from their families and placed in Han-run re-education centers, burial grounds have been bulldozed or built over, mosques destroyed, and religious practice banned.

NIGERIA

Christians are also living under a "Big Cloud of Terror" in Nigeria. In fact, every two hours, a Christian is killed there for believing in Jesus.

Research from the *2022 World Watch List* reveals that in 2021, more Christians were murdered for their faith in Nigeria than in any other country. Last year, Nigeria accounted for nearly 80% of Christian deaths

worldwide with more than 4,650 believers killed. The death toll once again makes Nigeria the world's most violent place for Christians—for the second consecutive year.

“We can document that 4,650 Nigerian Christians were killed during the previous reporting period for the 2022 World Watch List,” says Open Doors USA CEO David Curry. “Those are just those we know about—and can report. They were tracked, targeted, raped and killed . . . because they were Christians.”

In addition, according to an investigatory report published by Reuters on December 7, 2022, the Nigerian military has conducted at least 10,000 secret and often forced abortions on women and girls rescued from Boko Haram's captivity and believed to have been impregnated by its jihadists. Headlined “The Abortion Assault: Nigerian military ran secret mass abortion programme in war against Boko Haram,” Reuters found after interviewing 33 victims that the Nigerian Army has run a secret, systematic, and illegal abortion program in the country's northeast since at least 2013.

That report has been followed by another Reuters investigation released on December 12, 2022, entitled “Smothered, poisoned and shot: Nigerian Army massacred children in its war against Islamist insurgents, witnesses say.” The wire service drew on 40 sources, including parents, other civilians and soldiers who said they participated in dozens of military operations in which children were intentionally slaughtered. Witnesses give accounts of mass graves pre-dug where soldiers first killed the men, then the women, and then the children and rolled them into the graves and covering their bodies with dirt.

Leah Sharibu

On 19 February 2018, 14-year-old Leah Sharibu was among 110 students kidnapped from their school in Yobe State, Nigeria, by the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP). Tragically, five died in captivity. The others were released within a month, but Leah was kept because she refused to deny her faith in Jesus. Fellow captives said when the terrorists demanded to know who was Christian, Leah's arm shot up—even as her classmates tried to restrain her.

Leah turns 19 in May and has given birth to two children while in captivity, according to reports from former captives with knowledge of her whereabouts. Despite government assurances that she will be rescued, her family's pleas for negotiations are routinely ignored.

Leah is the internationally known face of thousands, like herself, held captive in terrorist hideouts.

Incessant Religious-based Violence

Incessant and extreme religious-based violence and terrorism in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa's Sahel continue unabated despite longstanding anti-terrorism campaigns funded by Western governments.

Christians are the most vulnerable and persecuted and the Nigerian government is unable, or unwilling, to halt this violence and protect its citizens. At least 109 formerly Christian communities and farms have been attacked and are now occupied with impunity in Southern Kaduna state according to a recent report from the Southern Kaduna People's Union. The same phenomenon of taking over, occupying, and renaming communities is happening in many northern states and nothing has been done to reclaim these villages.

In Nigeria alone, more than 3.5 million people have already been displaced—the vast majority are Christians and overwhelmingly Catholic who are ignored and unaided by the federal government.

Meanwhile, lobbyists for the Nigerian government continue to parrot the false claim that the violence is related to clashes between herdsmen (traditionally Fulani Muslims) and subsistence farmers (predominantly Christians) and related to scarce resources. Evidence of religious-based targeting of communities, individuals, and churches is significant and belies the official narrative. Christians are *not* initiating coordinated attacks on Muslims. Defensive actions by victims is not equivalent to the routine attacks being waged on Christian villages which have lived in harmony with the Fulani and other Muslim tribes for generations. Unfortunately, in many areas farms are left fallow as it is too dangerous to work the land, leading to concerns of famine.

In addition to killings, lucrative kidnapping-for-ransom cases have increased dramatically in the past three years. Christian women and young girls are the primary target, particularly in northern Nigeria but also increasingly in the south. This “warfare on women” is intended to strike fear in the community and cause them to abandon their properties.

Christian communities are terrorized by Muslim Fulani militants, Boko Haram, the Islamic State in the Western Africa Province (ISWAP), and Ansaru (al-Qaeda) as well as armed bandits—and these groups are increasingly working together. Unfortunate women and girls taken captive and numbering in the thousands are raped, forcibly converted, forced into sexual slavery, and sometimes killed even after ransoms have been paid. Entire communities have gone bankrupt trying to save their citizens.

Christian men and boys are also targeted by such groups. Husbands, fathers, and sons are killed with the aim of destroying livelihoods and depopulating Christian communities. Young boys are at risk of being compelled to fight as child soldiers, while church leaders and church members are vulnerable to abduction for ransom. High unemployment and unsafe schools increase opportunities for radicalization.

While the kidnapping of Chibok girls in 2014 and Dapchi students in 2018, including one male victim, caught the world’s attention for a time, attacks on school facilities continues. Nine of the Chibok girls were recovered in 2022, having one-by-one suddenly appeared out of the darkness. Nonetheless, 98 Chibok girls are still missing eight years out. Understandably, at least 12 million students refuse to go to school, and Nigeria has among the highest number of children out of school.

On May 12, a Christian woman named Deborah Emmanuel Yakubu, a student in northern Nigeria, was beaten to death and her body burned by a mob on campus after attempting to redirect a study chat group where other students had been evangelizing their Muslim faith. “Holy ghost fire, nothing would happen to me, is it by force you guys would always be sending these religious stuff in the group, the group wasn't created for that, but rather as a notice for when there's a test, assignment, exams etc not these nonsense religious posts,” said Deborah. At least 50-armed Nigerian security officers stood by and did nothing to disperse the mob or otherwise prevent Deborah’s murder.

On Pentecost Sunday, June 5, gunmen massacred dozens of Catholics as they worshipped in the deeply Christian Ondo state in southwest Nigeria.

For many years Catholic priests, seminarians, laity and Protestant ministers and congregants have been kidnapped and killed with impunity with shockingly few reported arrests and scarcely any prosecutions of the perpetrators.

Independent frontline journalists like Stephen Kefas and Luka Biniyat have been harassed with trumped-up criminal charges for reporting on conditions in violated communities. These state actions threaten the accuracy of objective data collection and reporting, and chill free speech and the stifle the press.

Conclusion

These few examples illustrate, the global persecution of Catholics and Christians and other people of faith demand a vigorous public condemnation and ongoing rebuke by the Vatican. As the titular head of the Catholic Church, your adamant denunciation of persecution of Christians in a record number of countries is needed now, more than ever.

In this holy season of Christmas, we need not only to hear, but to amplify the voices of the persecuted crying out in the wilderness. As Jesus himself told us, "*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,*" (Matthew 5:10) It falls to us—and we respectfully suggest most especially *you*—to help relieve their suffering here on earth by holding accountable and imposing costs on those responsible for perpetrating such crimes.

With hope in Christ's mercy,



Frank J. Gaffney
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Save the Persecuted Christians



Dede Laugesen
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Save the Persecuted Christians

*Note: This letter was revised on Jan. 13, 2023 to remove the original Dec. 12, 2022 appeal for Irish teacher Enoch Burke who has since been released.