

March 27, 2005: Persecution Persists - Edmonton Sun

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March 27, 2005 One week ago today, while touring Asia, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice attended a Palm Sunday services in what media reports have generally been calling "one of China's largest state-approved churches." That's a polite way of saying that China is on an American list of countries considered to be "of particular concern" when it comes to limiting religious freedom. Today, we celebrate Easter - the holiest day on the Christian calendar, when followers of Jesus Christ across the globe celebrate his resurrection from the dead. Early Christians were persecuted for their faith. In many parts of today's world, little has changed - as Rice's visit to China illustrated. Though China has laws that supposedly protect religious rights, the Communist government has banned organized worship outside of the "state-approved" churches such as the one Rice attended and has cracked down on so-called house churches, where "many religious leaders and adherents have been detained, arrested, or sentenced to prison terms," according to the 2004 report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. The report says that China fears the growth of churches and other religious groups because it "could constitute sources of authority outside of the control of the government and the Chinese Communist party." In other words, China's government doesn't want to have to compete with God for attention and loyalty. Or, as the group International Christian Concern puts it, "Christians in China are still looked at as lesser citizens, intellectually lacking and often a threat to national unity. China's government seeks out those people of faith to quiet them and ensure that they do not disrupt the ersatz utopia of party rule." But China is hardly the only country that persecutes Christians. In Eritrea - an eastern Africa nation bordering the Red Sea - 60 members of a charismatic church were arrested on New Year's Eve for participating in what the government called "illegal religious activities." As of last week, 14 of those members reportedly remained behind bars despite the fact that they haven't been officially charged. That's hardly unusual in Eritrea, which has been called a "hotbed of Christian persecution," with the number of Christians arrested well in excess of 200 in 2005. In the past few weeks in India, Hindu extremists violently assaulted several Christians in Rajasthan, and a Christian evangelist was beaten in police custody after being charged with attempting to convert Hindus. Those are just two of dozens of reports of attacks and assaults on missionaries, seminary students and other Christians in India. In Laos last year, according to the International Religious Freedom report, "there were reports of local officials pressuring minority Christians to renounce their faith on threat of arrest or forceful eviction from their villages. There were also several instances of persons detained or arrested for their religious faith." In Brunei, "Christian-based schools must give instruction in the Islamic faith to all students and are not allowed to teach Christianity," says the report. The situation in Cuba is very much like that of China, where the Communist government of Fidel Castro tolerates government-approved churches, but "unregistered religious groups continued to experience varying degrees of official interference, harassment, and repression." And while Canadians generally admire churches for performing charitable activities, in Cuba, even that is seen as subverting the government's iron grip on power. The report notes that "in June 2004, the government prohibited La Pastora Catholic Church in Santa Clara from distributing donated medicine and soap. Government officials advised the church that such activities are not authorized and resulted in illegal public gatherings." These examples are the proverbial tip of the iceberg. Yet stories like these rarely get big headlines in Canada or a lot of attention from our politicians, despite the fact that about three-quarters of Canadians claim to be Christian. We celebrate Easter today in part because in the Bible, Judas Iscariot betrayed Christ and sent him to his death on the cross for 30 pieces of silver. At what price have we betrayed Christ's followers today?