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NEWS FOCUS - The Lahore attacks are just the latest atrocity in a war on Christians

Imagine if correspondents in late 1944 had reported the Battle of the Bulge, but without explaining that it was a turning point in the

second world war. Or what if finance reporters had told the story of the AIG meltdown in 2008 without adding that it raised questions about derivatives and sub-prime mortgages that could augur a vast financial implosion?, John L Allen Jr, writes in The Spectator.

Most people would say that journalists had failed to provide the proper context to understand the news. Yet that's routinely what media outlets do when it comes to outbreaks of anti-Christian persecution around the world, which is why the global war on Christians remains the greatest story never told of the early 21st century.

Yesterday, more than 70 people were killed in Lahore in a suicide attack targeted against Christians celebrating Easter. In recent years, too, people around the world have been appalled by images of attacks on churches in Pakistan, where 85 people died when two suicide bombers rushed the Anglican All Saints Church in Peshawar, and in Kenya, where an assault on a Catholic church in Wajir left one dead and two injured.

Those atrocities are indeed appalling, but they cannot truly be understood without being seen

as small pieces of a much larger narrative. Consider three points about the landscape of anti-Christian persecution today, as shocking as they are generally unknown. According to the International Society for Human Rights, a secular observatory based in Frankfurt, Germany, 80 per cent of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed at Christians. Statistically speaking, that makes Christians by far the most persecuted religious body on the planet.

According to the Pew Forum, between 2006 and 2010 Christians faced some form of discrimination, either de jure or de facto, in a staggering total of 139 nations, which is almost three-quarters of all the countries on earth. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts, an average of 100,000 Christians have been killed in what the centre calls a 'situation of witness' each year for the past decade. That works out to 11 Christians killed somewhere in the world every hour, seven days a week and 365 days a year, for reasons related to their faith.

In effect, the world is witnessing the rise of an entire new generation of Christian martyrs. The carnage is occurring on such a vast scale that it

represents not only the most dramatic Christian story of our time, but arguably the premier human rights challenge of this era as well. To put flesh and blood on those statistics, all one has to do is look around. In Baghdad, Islamic militants stormed the Syriac Catholic cathedral of Our Lady of Salvation on 31 October 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 US-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. Most of these Iraqi Christians have gone into exile, but a staggering number have been killed.

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; thousands more were 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, Sister 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.

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