

Gods and Monsters

Is there a global surge in religious violence?

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Abstract

NOTE the date of the version. Later versions will be uploaded as we have time to add more info into our second analysis.

1 Introduction

In contrast to the overall decline of armed conflict in the world (Goldstein, 2011), religio-political violence seems to persist and maybe even increase. War, terrorism, and human rights abuse is justified by references to religious dogma and perceived inter-faith competition. The implications of this violence is often horrific, as shown by the atrocities in Syria leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths and millions of refugees.

Despite the obvious policy relevance of the issue, little is known about whether there is a particular link between religion and conflict. This is partly because of the difficulty to measure and isolate the effect of religion from other factors like economic and community segregation (Rustad et al., 2011; Bhavnani et al., 2014), ethno-political exclusion (De Soysa and Nordås, 2007; Cederman, Wimmer and Min, 2010), or the opportunity for rebellious mobilization (Lichbach, 1994; Fearon and Laitin, 2003).

But there is also a commonly in-explicit and untested assumption that among all the overlapping features of a conflict, religion is the most influential. This is often apparent in what becomes the predominant narratives of conflict. For example, Brass (1997) argue that many instances of "Hindu-Muslim" violence in India are "situations that are not inherently ethnic/communal in nature or are ambiguous in character" (p 6). A more recent example is the Patani insurgency in southern Thailand which first came to public attention after the army attack on the *Kru Se* mosque in April 2004 although violence can be traced back several years prior (Chalk, 2002; Wattana, 2006).

In this paper, we seek to advance the knowledge about religion and violence by focusing specifically on the immediate effect of a direct attack on a holy space on subsequent violence. If religious identities are more sensitive than other potential mobilization identities such as ideology or ethnicity (Mueller, 2000; Gates, 2002; Kalyvas, 2003), we expect a swift counter-reaction to an attack on a symbolically important location. As a consequence, we would expect an immediate upsurge in violence, providing visibly different conflict dynamics compared with situations where religion is not directly implicated.

To explore whether this is the case, we are utilizing new approaches to sorting out particular events from a regional sample as well as the complete global information on political violence events collected by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). We extract information about the specific *target* for each violent event using supervised machine learning. In our first empirical investigation, we focus on events from 13 countries in the East Asian region 1989-2014 where we find that attacks on religious spaces are followed by a small but statistically significant escalation of overall violence. We then expand on this analysis by modifying our data extraction approach globally, where we find

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2 Linking religion and violence

There are three possible ways through which religion has been argued as influencing the production of violence; classified as either primarily focusing on grievances, mobilization patterns, or identity. According to the first view, one or more of the organizations in a conflict can have religious goals or be led by a religious figure. Examples of this is the present-day Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in the Middle East, or the *Cristero* Rebellion in Mexico 1926-29.

Most existing scholarship has focused on exploring whether this relationship leads to more, longer, or harder to settle conflicts. Thus, "religiousness" is defined by the stated political goals of the perpetrators (Svensson, 2007); whether perpetrators and targets belong to different religions (Horowitz, 2009); or whether a given actor uses religion as a source for legitimacy (Fox, 2008; Basedau, Pfeiffer and Vüllers, 2014). The findings from this research program, whether focusing on international war, interstate conflict, genocide, state repression, and terrorism - are largely inconclusive (Ellingsen, 2000; Gurr, 2000; Reynal-Querol, 2002; Fox, 2004; De Soysa and Nordås, 2007; Toft, 2007; Svensson, 2007; Fox, 2008).

The second way that religion can influence conflict is as a tool for mobilization. It is suggested that religious communities offer a network to overcome the collective action problem when organizing for violence regardless of the actual goals pursued by the movement (Basedau, Pfeiffer and Vüllers, 2014). As more cohesive group identities, whether they are religious, ethnic, family bonds, or based on other shared experiences has been found as beneficial for collective action. This is particularly the case if group members are convinced that they are under threat or discriminated against (Reynal-Querol, 2002; Fox, 2004; Cederman, Wimmer and Min, 2010). Indeed, religion may be one of the most instrumental identities for this purpose, as according to Mol (1976), the slow-changing nature of religious traditions and institutions provide individuals and groups more secure anchors for self-reference in a rapidly changing social order. As a consequence, religious interactions and rituals stimulates group cohesion and a sense of belonging in the community.

There is, however, a difference between situations when religion is being used as part of political indoctrination and the immediate response that should follow an attack on this shared identity. This effect is less explicitly discussed in the civil conflict literature, but it often features in the literature on communal violence. For example, it was reported that a noisy Hindu procession in Yeola, India was attacked by Muslims after disturbing a mosque in 1893 (Jaffrelot, 2005). Similarly, the bombing of the al-Askari mosque in Samarra, Iraq in February 2006 triggered a wave of retaliatory violence (Weidmann and Salehyan, 2013).

For believers of any faith, sacred spaces are of particular importance. An attack on a temple, a church, a mosque, or a synagogue is an attack on the identity of a community, and is therefore likely to be felt more strongly than violence at a random public space. As have been argued elsewhere (Toft, 2005), this creates a fertile breeding ground for mobilization and violence is likely to

escalate. Whether this angry reaction is towards another religious community or against the state is probably different from case to case, but we expect that there is an overall risk for an escalation of violence in the country.

This provides us with the following hypothesis:

Attacks against religious locations leads to an escalation of violence.

3 Data and Research design

There is at present limited data available about specifically attacks on religious institutions but some such events may be included as part of several different data collection efforts. The only, to our knowledge, attempt to focus specifically on this phenomenon aims for global coverage but uses limited source material and only covers the years 2009-2010 (Satha-Anand and Urbain, 2013).

Existing data on the use of violence by or against communal groups focus specifically on a single country (Varshney, 2003), are collected without clear systematic definitions (Horowitz, 2001), or explore ethnicity in relation to political power (MAR, 2009; Wimmer, Cederman and Min, 2009). It is, however, possible to extract information about attacks on religious places from larger datasets providing there is sufficient detail about single events or if targets are classified.

The main basic source material for our data is drawn from the event descriptions as collected by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program and which forms the UCDP-GED dataset (Sundberg and Melander, 2013). This dataset include information about interstate and intrastate political armed struggle (Gleditsch et al., 2002), violence between non-state groups (Sundberg, Eck and Kreutz, 2012), and violence targeting civilians (Eck and Hultman, 2007). A potential problem by this data is the definitional criteria that the violence much result in at least 25 fatalities to be included, which means that some relevant observations may be excluded (Kreutz, 2015). Therefore, we use information of *all* events which are added into the UCDP-GED underlying data material, including events where the perpetrator or incompatibility is uncertain.¹

We present two different empirical investigations. The first cover all countries in East Asia as we have controlled the quality of our machine coding with the output of human coders. The second investigation use the East Asia information as a training set and is extracted from the complete UCDP-GED underlying data.

3.1 Dependent variable

The dependent variable is the the monthly amount of fatalities in a country from all forms of interstate, intrastate, and non-state conflict as well as one-

¹It is worth noting, though, that events will only be registered by UCDP if there is a suspicion that the violence may be relevant for one of the three main categories. Thus, this sample is still primarily lethal events, and it does not include pure individual attackers.

sided violence. We use the 'best' estimate of fatalities from UCDP-GED. Since our data include some events that are uncertain, we also explore the number of events as an alternative dependent variable.

3.2 Independent variable, East Asia

For the East Asia sample, we extract relevant events of attacks on religious places from UCDP-GED using supervised machine learning (Witten and Frank, 2005); a method which perform with a similar accuracy as human coders, and much better than classical (non-machine learning) computational methods (King and Lowe, 2003; Lee et al., 2012). The process was as follows. Using Support Vector Machines (Steinwart and Christmann, 2008) and Nonparametric Content Analysis (Hopkins and King, 2010) methods, we created a simplified classification of the content of each event, extracting information about the *target* of each attack. Using the amount of information provided in the report, each event received a score relating to the likelihood that the report contain information about an attack on a religious space. Having noted that at times religious leaders (priests, monks, imams, etc) are attacked outside a religious space, we expanded our definition to include individuals in such positions as targets as well. After having extracted all the reports with a score above 0 as well a random sample of reports with that score, we hand-coded the content. The distribution, summarized according to percentiles, is shown in Table 1. Thus, although our data is collected through human coding, the benefit of the computerized process is to immediately identify which events are likely to be relevant (Croicu and Weidmann, 2015).

Table 1: Date extraction statistics, East Asia

Percentile	N	Max score	Location	Official	Neither
99-100%	37	206.84	26 (70%)	9 (24%)	7 (19%)
98-99%	37	51.84	22 (59%)	7 (19%)	11 (30%)
96-98%	111	38.66	57 (51%)	15 (14%)	44 (40%)
90-95%	188	26.0	34 (18%)	12 (6%)	143 (76%)
80-90%	373	13.4	20 (5%)	15 (4%)	311 (83%)
50-80%	1,119	7.06	58 (5%)	49 (4%)	1,041 (93%)
0-50%	1,874	2.0	45 (2%)	68 (4%)	1,800 (96%)
Total coded	3,738	206.84	262 (7%)	175 (5%)	3,384 (91%)
Not coded	9,286	0	-	-	-

In addition to the data compiled in this manner, we seek to complement with information from an alternative source. Since we are interested in whether religious targeting provokes an escalation in violence, we add data on attacks perpetrated by individuals or unknown actors against religious spaces. To do this, we added information from Global Terrorism Database (GTD) into our

dataset (START, 2013).² Adding information from this source increases our data with 33 observations,³ giving us a total of 326 religious attacks in 11 countries. Table 2 provide descriptive statistics for the East Asia dataset.

Table 2: Summary statistics, East Asia 1989-2014

Attacks on religion (UCDP + GTD)	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Thailand	1.89	3.7	0	34	106
Philippines	4.21	7.29	0	41	72
Myanmar	4.47	9.23	0	63	59
Indonesia	11.69	38.94	0	271	54
Cambodia	4.5	7.37	0	23	14
China	13.1	30.08	0	96	10
Papua New Guinea	4.2	3.42	1	9	5
Laos	1	1.41	0	2	2
Malaysia	1	0	1	1	2
Japan	1	-	1	1	1
Total	4.96	17.86	0	271	326
All violence (UCDP)	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Philippines	8.38	49.46	0	1884	3896
Thailand	2.03	9.54	0	212	2754
Myanmar	6.44	27.01	0	1000	2746
Indonesia	5.39	30.51	0	1188	2448
Cambodia	7.97	21.48	0	300	669
Papua New Guinea	4.78	6.60	0	51	206
China	22.74	205.83	0	2600	160
Laos	10.15	18.60	0	92	53
Malaysia	1.57	1.72	0	8	49
South Korea	2.32	3.33	0	17	25
Vietnam	2.4	2.55	0	7	10
Taiwan	2	1.41	1	3	2
North Korea	1	-	1	1	1
Total	6.13	40.4	0	2600	13019

3.3 Independent variable, Global

For the global analysis, we identify attacks on religious spaces informed by the regional sample. (This bit will be further elaborated on...)

Essentially, for an event to be coded as an attack on religious space, it will have to combine a score 20 or above on our natural language predictive score, with being identified by our machine predictor. It provides us with a total of 1,299 attacks on religious spaces in 73 different countries out of a total of 112,826 political violence events.

²The GTD has been criticized for definitional and methodological inconsistency which means that the source in itself is unsuitable for systematic time series cross-case comparisons (Mack, 2007).

³The GTD identify a total of 262 attacks aimed at "religious figures/institutions" in East Asia 1989-2014. In 80 of these, there were at least one (or "unknown") fatality, while 47 events were already included in UCDP-GED.

3.4 Statistical technique and control variables

Our theoretical argument posit that attacks on religious spaces or officials leads to an escalation of the violence in a country. Our dependent variable is a positive count with over-dispersion, we estimate our analysis through negative binomial regression models. More specifically, the conditional variance is much higher than the conditional mean for both the fatalities and the event count variables.

We first explore whether the years with much attacks on religious targets are more violent than those without, and this set-up also allows us to test for a battery of possible confounding variables. Drawing on the literature on ethnic conflict and possible selection bias from reporting, we control for whether the government is dominated by an ethnic group (Vogt et al., forthcoming), the regime type in the country (CSP, 2015)⁴, media freedom (Whitten-Woodring and Van Belle, 2014), population, urbanization, GDP/capita, GDP/capita growth, and size of the military (World Bank, 2015).

It could, however, be expected that attacks on religious places have an immediate and short-term effect on conflict dynamics, which may not be visible in yearly data. After creating country-month data, we then look at the immediate effect of *any* attack against a religious space through a regression discontinuity design with country-specific fixed effects. This means that we specifically compare the number of fatalities in a time period *before* an attack on religious space with a similar time period *after* the attack. Under mild continuity assumptions, we are thus performing a comparison between observations that are ex ante comparable in all other ways (on average) except in their experience of a recent attack on a religious space. To avoid that these findings are influenced by cross-national variation in unobserved factors, we perform these estimations with country-fixed effects, maximizing the constrains on our data.⁵ As we are interested in the aftermath of an attack on an religious space, we get more information from post-attack months. Thus, when there are multiple attacks, we follow the aftermath of the most recent one.

4 Findings from East Asia

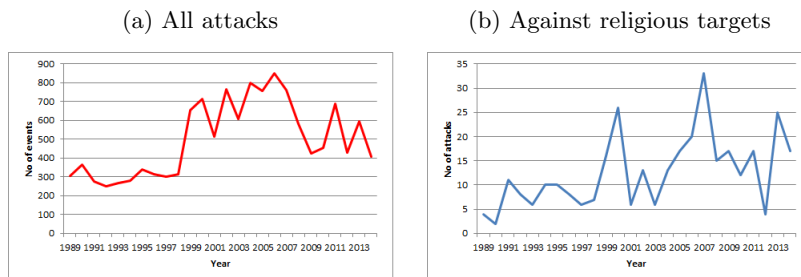
Before we discuss the statistical analysis, we provide some descriptive statistics on the trend for religious spaces in East Asia.

Figure 1 show the temporal distribution of annual events captured by UCDP-GED in East Asia (a), and those targeting religious spaces or officials (b). What needs to be considered is that this figure shows events rather than fatalities, meaning that one event can pertain to the killing of one individual to a 'summary' of a month-long battle campaign. The most violent settings in East Asia

⁴We measure regime type both through the aggregated regime type variable (polity2), and whether the executive is selected in a competitive process (xrcomp) to avoid definitional conflation, see Vreeland (2008).

⁵For a similar research design, see Kreutz (2012).

Figure 1: Violent events in East Asia, 1989-2014



in the time period 1989-1997 were the civil conflicts in Cambodia and Myanmar, and the attacks on civilians in China and Myanmar, where information about specific attacks were rare. Thus, the increased number of events reported after 1998 is a consequence of better access to detailed information,⁶ but also the escalation of violence in Indonesia and the Philippines.

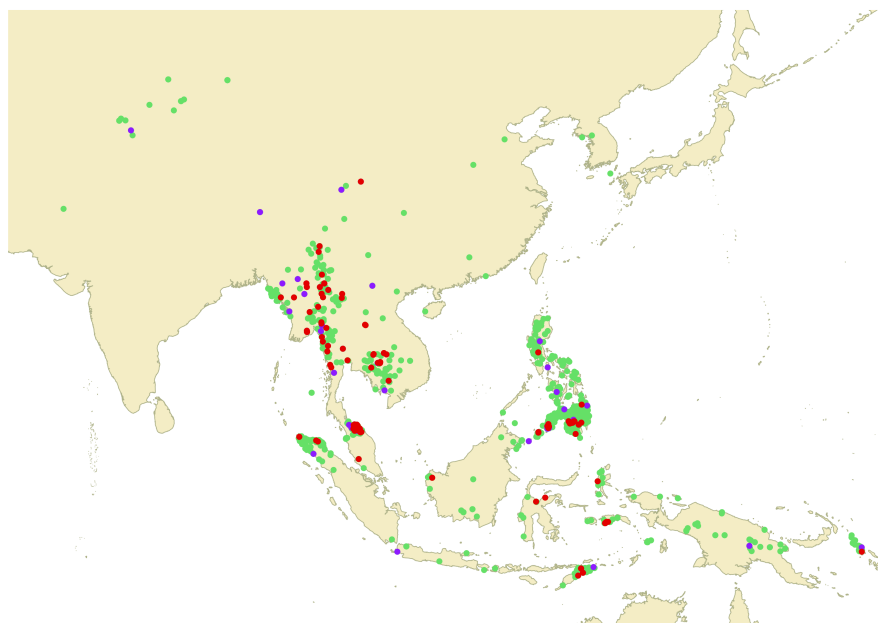
The latter is visible when looking at the increase in attacks on religious targets, as Indonesia in 1999 experienced severe inter-religious communal violence between Christians and Muslims (in particular in Maluku). The next escalation of religious violence was in 2005-2006 which correspond with the escalation of the Patani conflict in southern Thailand, and then again in 2013 where the increase was driven by anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar.

Figure 2 show the spatial distribution of the violent events for this time period. As expected, attacks on religious spaces are primarily located in the countries we already have discussed, but there has also been some attacks in the Philippines, Cambodia and in China.⁷ Just looking at the map, it is easily discerned that attacks on religion occur in areas where violence in general is relatively common. The question then is whether religious violence leads to an escalation in these areas, or whether religious buildings just happen to be attacked because they are in the conflict zone?

⁶This is also influence by increased use of the internet for publishing news and NGO reports, see Croicu and Kreutz (2015).

⁷The map only show the location of the events identified by UCDP, but most of the additional GTD events were in the same countries.

Figure 2: Attacks on religion in East Asia, spatial distribution (UCDP)



Red= attack on sacred space; Blue= attack on religious official; Green= other violent event

4.1 Statistical analysis

We begin by exploring whether attacks on religious places occur in the same year as a country experiences a high amount of political violence. Table 3 shows the results following our negative binomial regressions; Model 1-3 uses the number of events in a year as the dependent variable, while Model 4-6 use the number of fatalities. We first estimate a bivariate relationship which shows that country-years with more attacks on religious locations also experience more violence overall. In the second set of models, we introduce a lagged variable relating to religious violence, and we see that this also is correlated with on at least 95% statistical significance level.⁸ This implies some support for the argument that the presence of religious attacks leads to more violence overall.

In the final Models (3 and 6), we introduce a series of possible confounding variables, and the correlations identified previously remain in the same direction but no longer with statistical significance. However, some of the controls consistently correlate with the level of violence in a country. Countries with greater media freedom experience less violent events as well as fewer fatalities, which suggests that the risk of under-reporting because of censorship should be less of a concern in this study. We also find that countries that are less urbanized have less violence, although more populous countries are more violent. While these findings provide some interesting insights by themselves, these factors do not provide substantive information about the link between religion and violence.

⁸A separate bivariate analysis of the lagged variable and the level of violence is also significant (not reported).

Table 3: Negative binomial regression in East Asia, country-year

	(1) event	(2) event	(3) event	(4) deaths	(5) deaths	(6) deaths
Rel. attacks	0.823** (2.89)	0.629*** (3.31)	0.189 (1.73)	0.783** (2.71)	0.713*** (3.39)	0.271 (1.89)
Rel. attacks (t-1)		0.571* (2.55)	0.109 (1.50)		0.704** (2.95)	0.222 (1.33)
Regime type			0.0483 (0.74)			0.00889 (0.12)
Ethnic exclusion			42.39 (1.76)			36.47 (0.41)
GDP/cap			-0.0000619 (-0.38)			-0.0000144 (-0.08)
GDP/cap change			0.0105 (0.41)			-0.0116 (-0.20)
Media freedom			-0.928*** (-3.38)			-1.280* (-2.24)
Urbanization			-0.156* (-2.40)			-0.221* (-2.44)
Population			0.401* (2.39)			0.607* (2.06)
._cons	1.921*** (3.70)	1.298* (2.52)	-0.932 (-0.30)	4.011*** (7.51)	2.966*** (5.48)	-1.157 (-0.37)
lnalpha						
._cons	1.869*** (6.69)	1.689*** (6.45)	0.697** (2.68)	2.441*** (8.13)	2.293*** (8.32)	1.558*** (5.09)
<i>N</i>	455	437	249	455	437	249

t statistics in parentheses. Robust standard errors clustered on country.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

We then move to the short-term effect of religious attacks and subsequent dynamics of violence. Figure 3 show the substantive effect in the form of average change in the predicted probability of the number of fatalities in a month before and after an attack on a religious location. The different estimations are made using a sliding window, where we first look at the predicted change using only information from the month prior to an attack, and the month after. The next (2+2) uses information from two months prior to an attack and two months after, thereafter 3+3, and so forth. All estimations are modelled with country-fixed effects.

The first two estimations in Figure 3 (1+1 and 2+2) are represented by

Figure 3: Monthly violence after attacks on religious space in East Asia, 1989-2014

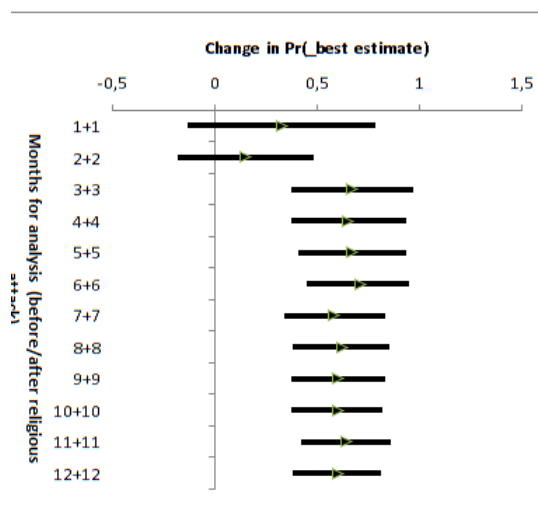
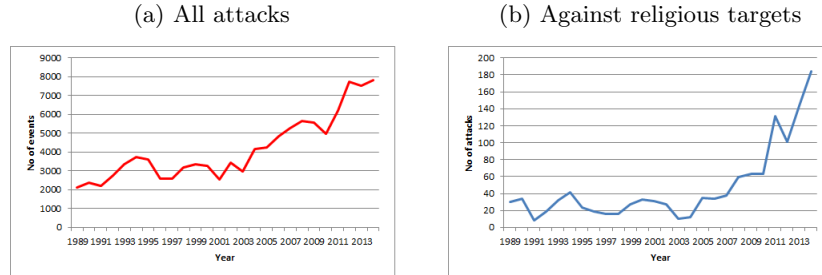


Figure 4: Violent events, globally 1989-2014



lines that crosses '0' which means that we cannot conclude that an attack on a religious location leads to a decreased (less than 0) or an increase (above 0) in subsequent violent intensity. However, when we use information from a longer time series, we find a small but largely consistent positive effect of attacks on religious spaces on subsequent violence. Regardless of whether we compare the time ranges of three months prior and after the religious attack to the year before and after, there is an increased predicted probability of slightly more than 0.5 fatalities per month in the country.

5 Global findings

The trend regarding the prevalence of attacks on religious spaces as well as violent events as a whole globally is described in Figure 4, while the list of countries with religious attacks is provided in Table 4. Some 38 per cent of the attacks on religious spaces are coded as one-sided violence (492 incidents), while 37 per cent (477) were part of an armed conflict, and just 25 per cent (330) part of a non-state conflict.

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Table 4: Religious attacks/country, global data 1989-2014

Attacks on religion (UCDP)	events		events
Nigeria	190	South Sudan	4
Iraq	143	Cambodia	3
Afghanistan	125	Libya	3
Pakistan	63	Mali	3
India	52	United Kingdom	3
Central African Republic	47	Uzbekistan	3
Yemen	42	Brazil	2
Syria	41	Burundi	2
Philippines	36	Chad	2
Indonesia	35	Guinea	2
Israel (& Palestine)	32	Guinea-Bissau	2
Egypt	23	Cote d'Ivoire	2
Somalia	23	Nepal	2
Lebanon	22	Serbia	2
Thailand	21	Tajikistan	2
Kenya	18	Tunisia	2
DRC	17	Azerbaijan	1
Sri Lanka	17	Bangladesh	1
Rwanda	15	Benin	1
Russia	12	Bolivia	1
Myanmar	10	Comoros	1
Sudan	10	Rep. Congo	1
Algeria	9	Eritrea	1
Angola	8	Ghana	1
Ethiopia	7	Guatemala	1
Iran	7	Haiti	1
Bosnia-Herzegovina	6	Honduras	1
China	6	Kyrgyzstan	1
Niger	6	Malaysia	1
Cameroon	5	Paraguay	1
El Salvador	5	Peru	1
Liberia	5	Senegal	1
Papua New Guinea	5	Tanzania	1
Sierra Leone	5	Ukraine	1
Mauritania	4	Vietnam	1
Mexico	4	Zimbabwe	1
Nicaragua	4		