Diplomatic relationships between Turkey and key EU nations have deteriorated dramatically in recent days.

InContext’s east Africa office reports on South Sudanese refugees fleeing violence and famine, seeking refuge in neighbouring Uganda.

China’s ruling Communist Party has hardened its stance on Islam in response to an Islamic State (IS) video vowing to strike China.

PROJECT HERO is helping to ensure the future of the Church in Syria, through aid distribution.

Turkey in Diplomatic Row with EU Nations

Concern among EU member states over the direction Turkey appears to be heading in has only deepened in recent weeks. Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte voiced his unease over Turkey’s proposed constitutional changes, saying it would take the aspirant European Union member state “in a less democratic direction”.

Turkish rallies in Europe

President Erdoğan’s plans to have Turkish government ministers address rallies in Germany, the Netherlands and elsewhere aimed to garner the support of roughly 4.6 million expatriate Turks living in Western Europe, many of whom will be eligible to vote in next month’s referendum.

But these planned rallies have been met with stiff resistance from EU nations who have sought to ban such gatherings. Mr Rutte wrote on his Facebook page: “We believe that Dutch public space is not the place for political campaigns of other countries.” President Erdoğan lashed out with accusations of “Nazi practices” in response to Germany and the Netherlands blocking proposed rallies.

German Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere on Tuesday (14 March) appealed to German residents of Turkish origin not to regard people who disagree with them as ‘traitors, Nazis, terrorists or enemies of Turkey’. He went on to state: “We will not tolerate it if representatives of other states try to position themselves as guardians of freedom.”

Deteriorating relationships

Turkey, the geopolitically strategic Eurasian nation (straddling two continents), has long been a candidate for European Union (EU) membership, though little progress has been made in the last decade. The signing of the EU-Turkey refugee deal in March 2016, which aimed to address the flow of migrants and asylum seekers traveling across the Aegean Sea from Turkey to the Greek islands, looked to be propelling Turkey towards this long-time goal. However, the failed coup (July 2016), the subsequent waves of arrests of judges, military personnel, civil servants, teachers and journalists, and the increasingly authoritarian style of the Turkish president has alarmed many Europeans.

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Backdrop of critical elections

National elections in the Netherlands this week (as well as in Germany and France later in the year) serve as a backdrop for the current dispute with Turkey. Incumbent governments face a tight race against right-wing populist parties, many of which focus on Muslim immigration as a central issue in their election campaigns.

In the Netherlands, far-right politician Geert Wilders’ campaign promises include ‘shuttering’ the country’s mosques, banning the Quran, closing the borders to Muslim countries, ditching the euro and leaving the
European Union. Although his party’s popularity has taken a dip in recent weeks, the election outcome is still thought to be uncertain.

President Erdoğan has said that Turkey would seek the help of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation among others to intensify the fight against what he called “hatred against foreigners, racism and anti-Islam trends”.

**FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

The deepening rift between Turkey and key EU nations could potentially result in major political and spiritual shifts in the region.

Turkey, a Muslim-majority nation with a long history of secularism but claiming full freedom of religion, has been moving steadily towards intimidation and minority oppression. In the wake of last year’s failed coup, local and expat Christians have not escaped the crackdown on dissent. “Turkish President Erdoğan sees anti-Christian conspiracy theories as an effective strategy for galvanising popular support for his one-man rule,” said Aykan Erdemir, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defence of Democracies and former member of the Turkish Parliament, in *The Wall Street Journal*. President Erdoğan could very well use the current, antagonistic atmosphere with the EU as a pretence to clamp down further on Christian practices within Turkey, since many view Christianity as a Western import. Turkey is labelled a “hostile” nation for Christians and “one of the least evangelised countries in the world” by Voice of the Martyrs.

Although the concern expressed by EU nations over the mass gatherings of Turkic communities is valid, the suppression thereof (often violently) has the opposite effect to the desire for cohesion. Muslim minorities lash out or feel further alienated from their host cultures, which ultimately plays into the hands of the European populist parties’ rhetoric concerning migrants and counteracts the wonderful work that has been happening among Muslim refugees in places like Germany and the Netherlands. It provides fuel to fan the flames of hatred and division, and very effort needs to be made to defuse the rising tensions in the region.

**PRAY > For wisdom for international leaders in defusing the volatile situation > For believers in Europe to be bridge-builders with immigrants in their communities**

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**SOUTH SUDANESE SEEK REFUGE IN UGANDA**

By Andrew Richards

A new United Nations report describes South Sudan as teetering on the edge of genocide and ethnic cleansing. It’s a stark portrayal of the world’s youngest country whose crises now include famine. The seven-month inquiry by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights into South Sudan is the most comprehensive report so far into ethnic cleansing and conditions that could lead to genocide in the nation deep in civil war. The report includes new details on deliberate starvation and bombardment of civilians. (*Eyewitness News*)

**Growing crisis**

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) about 2,500 refugees are crossing from South Sudan into Uganda every day. The South Sudanese refugee crisis has now become the largest in Africa and the third largest after Syria and Afghanistan, with more than 3.5 million people having been forcefully displaced due to civil war. Their report found: “The period between September and December 2016 saw almost half a million South Sudanese seeking refugee in neighbouring countries – an average of almost 4,100 people every day for four months.”

Conflict erupted soon after South Sudan gained independence from Sudan in 2011, with an internal power struggle between President Salva Kiir and vice President Riek Machar finally spilling over into civil war in December 2013. Most refugees claim that the reason for the war is a biased view of the Dinka tribe, favoured by President Salva Kiir, with the government discriminating against all other tribes. Reports of mass killings have compelled the United Nations to conduct a seven-month inquiry, with almost conclusive findings of genocide.

**Recent findings**

iContext International East Africa (INCIEA) recently visited refugees in Northern Uganda to find out more about the conflict. INCIEA director, Aron Mwasile said: “Despite the bloodshed, the wars in Sudan and South Sudan have been forgotten and nobody seems to care about it. South Sudanese are being slaughtered like animals, woman raped and children left parentless without anyone crying for these people. The media is only reporting a fraction of the reality.”

With a lack of international funding the UN is struggling to alleviate the physical suffering of refugees, opening the doors for Christian organisations like Global Link Africa, World Vision and the Lutheran World Fund to step in and help. Felix, a refugee from South Sudan, explained just how dire the situation is: “It is very difficult to be a refugee, because you start everything at zero. In South Sudan, we had our own farms, cultivated and got our own food plentifully hence we were able to decide what kind and size to eat. But here we are given only 12Kgs of maize and beans per month per person and one cup of cooking oil. There is no sugar, salt, no soap. We normally sell part of the 12Kgs of maize to at least get some money to buy necessities.”

Children and expectant mothers suffer the most with understocked medical facilities only able to provide paracetamol. Refugee pastor Geofrey Abure explains: “As a result of this, there are many deaths in the camps especially for pregnant women, because we don’t have money to take them to hospitals in town.” Mwasile also noticed many malmourned children lying hopelessly outside their grass huts, with one mother admitting: “The children cry for so long until their voices are almost gone. The children are crying because they need food and...”
Dozens of Myanmar soldiers have been killed in several clashes between ethnic rebels and the army along the border with China, threatening leader Aung San Suu Kyi's chief goal of ending decades of ethnic strife. More than 20,000 people from Myanmar have crossed China's border in recent weeks to escape the bitter fighting in the north, prompting Beijing to call for ceasefire between ethnic militias and Myanmar security forces.

A senior US general has confirmed that Russia deployed a long-range missile system that threatens the US and NATO and violates an international arms treaty. The deployment of the land-based cruise missile violates the "spirit and intent" of the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) between the US and Russia.

The US says it has begun deploying the first parts of a controversial missile defence system in South Korea. The Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence system (THAAD) is designed to protect against threats from North Korea. But the US-South Korean arrangement has angered many on the Korean peninsula and around the region, including China.

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The experiences of the Uighurs are notably different to those of the Hui Chinese Muslims, a 10.5 million-strong ethnic minority group who are far more integrated into Chinese society and who are more spread out across the nation. The Hui are descended from Persian, Central Asian and Arab Silk Road traders who intermarried with local Chinese, and they actively distance themselves from the Uighurs. For the Chinese government, the Hui’s cultural assimilation is far more acceptable than the Uighurs’ sense of a separate identity.

In an attempt to limit Islamic practices among the Uighurs, the Chinese government has clamped down in various ways: reportedly banning beards and hijabs in public spaces, keeping minors from religious activities and sending those who have participated to special schools for ‘rectification’, insisting on the sale of alcohol and cigarettes in Uighur-owned shops and restaurants, attempting to limit travel to Saudi Arabia for the hajj, and confiscating passports. This kind of repression has resulted in much anger among the Uighurs, and violent unrest has become a norm in the region.

The Uighurs are a strong ethnic minority group who are far more integrated into Chinese society and who are more spread out across the nation. The Hui are descended from Persian, Central Asian and Arab silk road traders who intermarried with local Chinese, and they actively distance themselves from the Uighurs. For the Chinese government, the Hui’s cultural assimilation is far more acceptable than the Uighurs’ sense of a separate identity.

In China, most of the religious minorities are classed together and are seen as a threat to the national identity by bringing in ‘outside influences’. For Chinese Christians, however good their intentions might be (i.e. being a blessing to the country), their non-secular faith is seen by many as divisive and rebellious. And unfortunately, any further clampdowns by the government against Islam (especially in light of the recent threats) is likely to extend to the Chinese Church as well – all religious minorities usually face the same restrictions.

In the wider missions perspective, another possible repercussion of harsh clampdowns on Chinese Muslims is retaliatory targeting of Chinese Christians working in Muslim countries. With the Chinese Church’s mission movement continuing to gain momentum, there are many believers now serving in ‘closed’ countries where economic relations have opened doors.

From a Christian perspective, it is also important to consider the hearts of the Uighurs who might be drawn to extremism. Analysts suggest that the appeal the Islamic State may hold for Uighurs is a sense of ‘belonging’ to something bigger, which is vastly different to the sense of alienation and opposition they experience in their own country. This appears to be something of a global trend – when Muslims feel alienated and persecuted in their places of origin, extremism becomes more attractive. For Christians, this human need to belong to something bigger is met in the Body of Christ – which offers peace and hope rather than a violent quest for paradise – and the challenge is to share this alternative with those who are seeking.

**PRAY** > For the Chinese authorities to respond to the threat appropriately and fairly > For Chinese believers to reach out to the Uighur community in love > For the Uighurs to encounter the Lord Jesus

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**KNOWLEDGE TO ACTION**

**PROJECT HERO**

Helping to ensure the future of the Church in Syria

In partnership with Lebanese Christian leaders, INcontext aims to distribute food, clothing, medicine and other basic necessities to the Church in Syria.

*Project Hero* focuses on those who choose to remain in Syria, who deal with the daily bombings from which others have fled, and who encounter death as part of daily life. Those who have stayed have done so for two reasons: either they have been unable to get out (for reasons such as old age or a lack of finances), or they have refused to leave Syria because it is home and they still believe they have a role to play in the reconstruction of the nation.

*"You stand beside us with your big support, we thank you for all your giving for the church and its people”* - Pastor in Damascus

The most recent donations enabled a church in Damascus to distribute food and supplies to 97 families.

To support this project, please make use of the INcontext bank details and use HERO together with your email address (as much as possible of it) as reference.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact our project department (gustav@incontextministries.org) or **CLICK HERE** to visit the website.

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**Incontext** Website: [www.incontextinternational.org](http://www.incontextinternational.org)

*Please visit our website for up-to-date information on events around the world.*

If you have any questions or comments relating to the articles in this publication or on the website, please feel free to contact us at any time.

**Incontext**

**Team Details**

Contact:

**General** - Mike:
Mobile: +028 8657380
mike@incontextministries.org

**AWIM** - Andrew:
andrew@incontextministries.org

**Communication & Prayer** - Donnelly:
donnelly@incontextministries.org

**Seminars** - Eric:
eric@incontextministries.org

**Events** - Hanlie:
hanlie@incontextministries.org

**Projects** - Gustav:
gustav@incontextministries.org

**Travel**/IT - Stefan:
stefan@incontextministries.org

**Book orders** - Beatrice:
beatrice@incontextministries.org

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**InContext**

**Banking Details**

**SOUTH AFRICA**
Bank: ABSA
Name: INcontext
Cheque acc no: 4078983933
Branch: Durbanville (632 005)

**UNITED STATES**
Account Name: M. Burnard
Bank: BMO Harris Bank
Account number: 4818649309
Routing Number: 071025661

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**FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

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