



 **OpenDoors**

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## **World Watch List Report 2020**

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**AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE:**  
How faith-based actors  
can respond to escalating  
worldwide persecution



Cover Picture: Despite death threats to him and his family, Pastor Abdalla<sup>1</sup> has bravely chosen to stay in Syria and has turned his church into a Centre of Hope for his community. He and his wife, along with their 13-year-old daughter and 11-year-old son, had the choice to leave Syria at the start of the war, two years after taking on the leadership of their church in 2009. Together, they made it their mission to continue supporting their 600-strong congregation in Aleppo. With the support of Open Doors, Pastor Abdalla provides much needed relief and medical care to those in need and oversees trauma care and assistance to the community for rebuilding their homes and their livelihoods. He even runs a football programme to get isolated children active and out in the open again.

This report was authored by Dr Matthew Rees on the basis of the research material produced by the Open Doors International World Watch Research unit.

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed throughout this report for security reasons.

# Contents

<b>4</b>	Introduction
<b>5</b>	Key findings
<b>6</b>	Standing up to persecution
<b>11</b>	What can the UK government do?
<b>13</b>	The pressure is on
<b>14</b>	Persecution spreads across Africa
<b>17</b>	See change
<b>20</b>	Persecution goes digital
<b>22</b>	Countries of special concern
<b>24</b>	Signs of hope
<b>26</b>	Open Doors advocacy
<b>27</b>	The global campaign for Christians in India
<b>30</b>	Methodology
<b>31</b>	Recommendations

# Introduction

The persecution experienced by Christians around the world continues to grow in both reach and intensity. In 2020, 260 million Christians live in World Watch List (WWL) top 50 countries where they are at risk of high, very high or extreme levels of persecution,<sup>2</sup> a 6% increase from 2019.

And as the number of persecuted Christians increases, so does the severity of the oppression they suffer. The persecutors' ultimate aim is to eradicate Christianity. And their primary tactic is to stoke fear within the wider Christian community, grinding down its resilience, hope and positive impact. That's why this report argues that the Department for International Development (DfID) needs to recognise religion as a potential vulnerability in any needs assessment underpinning its development or humanitarian programming.

It's also why local faith leaders must be recognised as a critical resource for development work. Church leaders, wider church networks and faith-based non-governmental organisations are highly trusted lifelines of care in isolated places, where no other help may be forthcoming.

In 2020, Brexit will undoubtedly take up a lot of our elected members' and Government's time and head space. But let's not lose sight of what can be achieved for persecuted Christians around the world.

As the United Kingdom redefines its global future, I urge all Parliamentarians to do all you can to ensure that the persecution of Christians worldwide remains an issue at the top of the government's agenda. At Christmas 2019 we were heartened to hear the Prime Minister pledging to stand in solidarity with persecuted Christians. It is key that supporting persecuted Christians is embedded into the fabric of Britain's interactions on the global stage, through an insistence that freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is 'make-or-break' when it comes to future trade deals with WWL countries.

Furthermore, as opposition parties select new leaders, it is key that those who take on new responsibilities embrace this issue. FoRB must not be the preserve of specific parties or individual leaders but demands a consensus across all parties.

Thank you for taking the time to read this report. Our research demonstrates that things can change for the better, not just for the worse. But we must continue to stand up for the millions of Christians who have hoped for change for many years and are yet to see it become a reality. Because if we don't, who will? Please read the recommendations on p.31 to see how you can take action today.



**Henrietta Blyth**  
Open Doors UK & Ireland CEO

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<sup>2</sup> Open Doors' World Watch Research Unit designate a 'high' level of persecution as a country with a persecution score of 41-60/100; 'very high' accounts for countries with a persecution score of 61-80/100, and 'extreme' persecution countries have a score of 81-100/100.

# Key findings

## The key findings in this report are:

- Persecution continues to get worse. In 2020, **260 million Christians** live in World Watch List top 50 countries where Christians are at risk of **high, very high or extreme** levels of persecution. This is up from 245 million in 2019
- However, behind the numbers, the 2020 World Watch List also tells a **story of hope**. Faith actors across the world are standing firm and strengthening communities against the odds. Church leaders, wider church networks and faith-based non-governmental organisations provide a lifeline of care in isolated places, where no other help is forthcoming
- Countries which had previously avoided more intense levels of persecution, such as **Sri Lanka (30)** and **Burkina Faso (28)** have, in the reporting period, experienced destabilising violence, highlighting the fragile persecution context in west Africa and south Asia
- The situation in **China** continues to worsen as it rises to number 23 on the World Watch List as more and more churches in China are experiencing pressure at the hands of the Chinese state. Over 5,500 churches have been destroyed, closed down or confiscated during the reporting period. In 2018, China was ranked at just 43
- Christians in **India (10)** are adapting to life under extreme persecution. In 2019, at least 1,445 physical attacks and death threats against Christians were reported
- **Nigeria (12)** saw the highest number of Christians killed for their faith, with approximately 1,350 Christians killed in the 2020 reporting period

## The key changes in this year's World Watch List are:

- **Burkina Faso** has entered the World Watch List top 50 for the first time in the ranking's history, leaping an extraordinary 33 places from number 61 to number 28. The country has seen relentless violence throughout the reporting period as Islamic militancy has taken hold within the country
- Ranked at 48 on the 2019 World Watch List, **Bangladesh** has moved to 38 in 2020 as converts to Christianity experience heightened surveillance and attacks.

### Persecution continues to worsen worldwide...

In 2020, 260 million Christians live in World Watch List top 50 countries where Christians are at risk of **high, very high or extreme** levels of persecution.

The number of countries where it is safe to be a Christian in **west Africa** is shrinking. You can now travel from **Morocco (26)** in the north west all the way to **Cameroon (48)** in the south west without leaving the World Watch List.

Approximately 1,350 Christians were killed for their faith in **Nigeria (12)**.

# Standing up to persecution

From Boko Haram fighters attacking Christian communities in northern Nigeria to hostility against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and the plight of the Yazidi and Christian communities of northern Iraq – a faith identity can make you extremely vulnerable.

This is the hard truth of the 2020 World Watch List.

Throughout the past year vulnerable Christian communities have experienced destabilisation on a grand scale. In some cases, the persecution has been long lasting. Christians in North Korea, Eritrea and the Maldives have continued to suffer extreme persecution at the hands of hostile leaders. In countries such as India and Bangladesh, Christians have begun the difficult process of adjusting their lives and routines in contexts of escalating persecution.

Then there are countries which have in recent years avoided some of the more extreme aspects of persecution but have in 2019 found their worlds turned upside down. The Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka and the growing threat of gunmen opening fire on churches in Burkina Faso are just some examples where the Christian community has been disrupted on a large scale in 2019.

The perpetrators of these attacks specifically target Christians in order to strike fear within the wider Christian community, to grind down its resilience, hope and effectiveness within society.

But behind the numbers, the 2020 World Watch List also tells a story of hope.

Attacks of the kind described above leave Christians isolated and exposed. But despite this isolation local faith actors are standing firm and strengthening communities against the odds. Church leaders, wider church networks and faith-based non-governmental

organisations provide a lifeline of care in isolated places, where no other help is forthcoming. They work in places where large relief agencies are unable to gain access. What's more, they provide appropriate care to meet the spiritual and physical needs of those experiencing trauma and displacement.

The following case studies outline the unique role faith-based actors play in delivering sustainable and appropriate support to vulnerable Christian communities in isolated and dangerous countries on the World Watch List.

## Case study 1: First responders

Local faith actors are often the first to respond to disasters and emergency situations. Church leaders and faith-based networks know their communities and can travel to isolated and dangerous locations because of their local knowledge and far-reaching relationships within the community.<sup>3</sup>

On Easter Sunday 2019, Islamic terrorists with links to Daesh bombed three churches and three hotels in Sri Lanka. Open Doors' partner and church leader Sunil headed directly to Batticaloa on Sri Lanka's east coast where the bombing of Zion Church took place.

Hundreds of worshippers had been present in Zion Church for the Easter celebration. Thirty lost their lives when a heavysset man in a pink shirt and cap, wearing a backpack blew himself up in the church compound. Fourteen of those killed were children.

When Sunil arrived in Batticaloa he made a few phone calls to contacts in the city who were able to give him the addresses of the funeral homes where the dead were being prepared for burial. He was able to spend time with the families of Zion Church who had lost loved ones in the bombing. Sunil then

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<sup>3</sup> See 'Local faith groups and joint humanitarian assistance' Joint learning initiative on faith and local communities, UNHCR.





Families of the victims of the Easter Sunday Sri Lanka bombings receiving care boxes from Open Doors' partners

met the leaders of Zion Church to inquire about their immediate needs.

However, it was the support he could provide beyond immediate humanitarian care that Sunil knew would be most important to this church community.

He said, "From previous crises, we know that victims get all the attention and support they need in the first days and weeks, but after a month the visits grow less and less, until they are left by themselves... but our message is: we are here and we are here to stay."

Sunil knew that responding quickly and identifying those most in need are crucial to any emergency response. However, he also knew that this had to be followed up by long-term sustainable care for this vulnerable community.

From Sunil's first response to the bomb attacks to the time of writing, Open Doors' partners in Sri Lanka have been working tirelessly to support victims in Batticaloa, Colombo and Negombo through providing care packages and trauma counselling for the families of the victims, as well ongoing resilience training for church families to remain strong in the face of increasing persecution.

## Case study 2: Long-term assistance

Local faith actors outlast the cycle of governments, political parties and international actors. Before humanitarian assistance existed as a practice and profession, faith groups have been key players in providing services and support to communities, and when international non-governmental organisations withdraw from war-torn contexts, faith actors remain and provide support to the community.

Take Pastor Abdalla in Aleppo, Syria. To the outside world, it may seem as though church activity, or even a Christian presence, has ceased to exist during the country's civil war. However, many church leaders have chosen to stay in Syria despite the bombing and destruction.

Pastor Abdalla has supported his church and the wider community through extremely difficult times. Church members have been kidnapped by rebel fighters because of their Christian faith, and at times heavy fighting has taken place all around his church, causing panic and distress to the community.<sup>4</sup>

At the height of the conflict millions of people fled from Syria to seek safety in Jordan, Lebanon and the West. Those who left the country were predominantly

<sup>4</sup>For further discussion on the key role of local faith actors in the Middle East context see 'The enduring relevance of the Church in the Middle East' Open Doors and Middle East Concern <<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Iraq-and-Syria-The-enduring-relevance-of-the-church-in-the-Middle-East.pdf>> Password: freedom

family breadwinners, the affluent and the able. The sick, vulnerable, elderly and those with young children were unable to flee. They have stayed in Syria's devastated villages amid the ongoing violence, lack of work and rising food prices.

Rejecting the opportunity to leave Syria in 2011, Pastor Abdalla has turned his church in Aleppo into a Centre of Hope for his community. At the height of the crisis the Centre of Hope distributed food aid and emergency relief. As the emergency aid is gradually scaling down, the centre is now providing microloans to the community. They are also offering medical care, trauma care and children's activities.

Pastor Abdalla has remained in Syria to encourage and support the very people who had no choice whether to leave or stay. He said, "Now, we have brought down the number of food packages, we try to focus on the lonely and sick, the elderly, larger families without a breadwinner, widows with no family members around, and families whose members have chronic diseases."

Local faith actors like Abdalla underpin fractured and broken societies all over the world, bringing hope to

some of the most difficult and hostile environments on earth. Their faith drives them to remain in these situations and to care for the most needy despite the danger to themselves.

What's more, they are effective partners, providing governments with a means of meeting their objectives and delivering sustainable support to some of the world's most vulnerable people. An NGO case study by the Conflict Transformation Working Group has demonstrated that local faith actors, in particular faith leaders, are seen as safe and neutral in conflict situations.<sup>5</sup>

### Case study 3: Appropriate care

Faith leaders can go where others cannot. Victims often relate to religious concepts and ideas and can gain strength from care which uses the language of faith. Using faith leaders to facilitate trauma care is key. They are trusted members of society and it is important that traumatised individuals receive care from those who understand their worldview.<sup>6</sup>

As the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has noted, local faith communities are



Pastor Abdalla with his team at the Centre of Hope in Aleppo

<sup>5</sup> Mlay, W. 'Some myths about faith-based humanitarian aid', Humanitarian Exchange, July 2004 <<http://odihpn.org/magazine/some-myths-about-faith-based-humanitarian-aid>>

<sup>6</sup> Rees, M.D. 'Religious minorities are especially vulnerable': intersectional identity and international aid'. LSE Blog, 15 January 2019 <<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2019/01/religious-minorities-are-especially-vulnerable-intersectional-identity-and-international-aid/>>



uniquely placed to provide appropriate care to persecuted communities. With approximately 80 per cent of the world's population believing in a god<sup>7</sup>, faith-based actors understand that 'religious sustenance' is a basic need for those who are displaced.<sup>8</sup>

Tirham is one of these faith leaders. She weaves the language of faith and religious ritual into the trauma care that she provides to women who have experienced sexual violence at the hands of Boko Haram fighters and Fulani militants. By relating to their core identity, she is able to bring about long-term healing, as those taking part in her workshops receive a sense of self-worth and empowerment.

When Tirham meets victims of rape or other violence, she says they find it difficult to express what they have experienced or to spend time with others. "Showing them love and acceptance has opened up their hearts to share their ordeal," she said. "The act of listening to them and allowing them to share their frustration, humiliation and fear for the future proved to be very helpful."

Providing spiritual sustenance to women who have experienced such horrific crimes promotes resilience, not only for these women but also within the wider community, as families and church communities are greatly strengthened when the women are empowered.<sup>9</sup>

One participant in Tirham's programme, whose name is Charity, was kidnapped and raped by a Boko Haram fighter and became pregnant. She experienced hostility from her husband and family when she returned to her village. However, over time as Charity began to share the course material she had been given by Tirham as part of the trauma care workshop, her husband stopped beating her and began to acknowledge her baby.

Faith leaders such as Tirham are excellent partners in development contexts because they understand



TOP Tirham meeting with Aisha, a trauma care programme participant

BOTTOM Trauma care participant Charity who was kidnapped by Boko Haram. She gave birth to baby Rahila whilst in captivity

the needs, values and worldview of those they are working with. Providing appropriate care of this nature helps trauma care recipients and families to heal. It empowers survivors and changes the social norms of their wider communities.

<sup>7</sup>The global religious landscape' Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, 18 December 2012 < <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>>

<sup>8</sup>Partnership note: On faith-based organizations, local faith communities and faith leaders' UNHCR, 2014, p.12, <<https://www.unhcr.org/539ef28b9.pdf>>

<sup>9</sup>See *ibid.*, p.14



Programme participants at the Open Doors trauma centre in Nigeria





# What can the UK government do?

A call for a conversation about the role of religion in development.

The case studies on the previous pages highlight the unique contribution faith actors play in providing humanitarian and development assistance in dangerous, isolated and complex situations. In light of this, Open Doors believes it is time to begin a conversation around two key issues:

1. The need for the UK government, and crucially the Department for International Development (DfID), to recognise religion as a factor of vulnerability in any assessment made in its programming around the world
2. The need for the UK government to recognise local faith actors as a resource which, with support from DfID, should be utilised in development work.

## Religion as a vulnerability

Vulnerability due to religious identity should be included in any vulnerability criteria. This should be specifically recognised where religious identity has played a role in a conflict and where converts face a particular threat. Furthermore, it is unlikely countries will meet their sustainable development goals, or sustain any progress made, without mainstreaming human rights into this work. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (the international right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB)), plays a key role, particularly as faith is often significant in the lives of those needing support in developing countries.

A 2019 statement by the US Administration, UK Foreign Office and Wilton Park<sup>10</sup> brought together expertise from FoRB experts and practitioners, as well as Foreign Office civil servants and political



Converts to Christianity, such as Bristy from Bangladesh (PICTURED), are extremely vulnerable on the basis of their faith identity

actors. It noted, “The intersection between the chaos of crisis and religious minority status dramatically increases vulnerabilities, yet assistance providers to date have been slow to recognise the significance of religion as a factor.”

Supporting persecuted Christians will, in the long run, allow DfID to meet its targets, because creating more tolerant societies, where persecuted Christians know their rights and are able to use them, will lead to more stable and prosperous societies.

Key to this is a conversation about how religious groups could accept funding from DfID. Along with this must be a discussion about the likely capacity building needed within faith-based organisations and local faith actors, so that they can adequately roll out development work and report its impact.

<sup>10</sup>Wilton Park statement on assisting religious minorities in humanitarian crises: Wilton Park, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2019 <<https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/WP1641-Outcome-statement.pdf>>

It is on this basis that Open Doors is calling on DfID to consider increasing and expanding funding to local faith actors for capacity building, and to channel assistance through local faith actors in accordance with humanitarian principles and standards.

## Using faith actors

Churches are situated within communities and are influential in the lives of those associated with the church and its wider ministries. To harness this influence and maximise their impact, local faith actors should be considered by DfID as a resource in its development programmes.

Local faith actors remain in places which are too dangerous for aid agencies or other institutions. They often refuse to leave their congregations. The longevity of local faith actors in their communities builds trust; hence they are well placed to deliver aid. This also gives local faith actors a unique role in shaping opinion and behaviour within their congregations, which can extend to the wider local community too.<sup>11</sup>

Local faith actors take a 'whole-person approach' and provide spiritual capital as well as social and financial capital to a community.<sup>12</sup> This unique and intangible resource offers distinctive support to victims because it understands these people's holistic needs. This approach provides a more 'culturally sensitive and localised service' than larger aid agencies can offer.<sup>13</sup> This holistic approach provides value for money in development work.

There is a need to acknowledge that it is simply unreasonable to expect a local faith actor to differentiate between aid and development work and everyday spiritual and pastoral work. As was noted in the 2019 statement by the US Administration, FCO and Wilton Park,<sup>14</sup> "While the principle of



A lady preparing food packages for families in Aleppo, Syria as part of the Centre of Hope activities supported by Open Doors

humanity and impartiality is important, humanitarian practitioners may need to focus more intently on understanding the distinct needs and vulnerabilities of religious minorities in order to be effective."

Understanding the nuanced and complex roles that faith actors play in development contexts is key if their contribution is to be teased out effectively in development programming.

Furthermore, the humanitarian community should be flexible with its funding approach. By scaling down to smaller programmes and using local faith actors the humanitarian community could minimise costs, yet gain many of the assets that local faith actors can bring to bear. It is therefore in the interest of departments such as DfID to identify practicable and appropriate faith actors who are trusted by local populations to deliver humanitarian, stabilisation, education, reconstruction or recovery assistance.

**> If you are an MP, please consider writing to the Secretary of State for International Development to highlight these the key points outlined above.**

<sup>11</sup> 'Integral, inspirational and influential' Tearfund, 2017 <[https://www.tearfund.org/~media/files/tilz/churches/integral\\_mission/2017-tearfund-integral-inspirational-and-influential-en.pdf](https://www.tearfund.org/~media/files/tilz/churches/integral_mission/2017-tearfund-integral-inspirational-and-influential-en.pdf)>

<sup>12</sup> 'Local Faith Community Responses to Displacement in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey: Emerging Evidence and New Approaches' Greatrick, A., Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E., Ager, A., Rowlands, A. and Stonebridge, L., Refugee Hosts Programme, 2018 <<https://refugeehosts.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/local-faith-report.pdf>> and 'Integral, inspirational and influential' Tearfund, 2017 <[https://www.tearfund.org/~media/files/tilz/churches/integral\\_mission/2017-tearfund-integral-inspirational-and-influential-en.pdf](https://www.tearfund.org/~media/files/tilz/churches/integral_mission/2017-tearfund-integral-inspirational-and-influential-en.pdf)>

<sup>13</sup> 'Local faith groups and joint humanitarian assistance' Joint learning initiative on faith and local communities, UNHCR

<sup>14</sup> 'Wilton Park statement on assisting religious minorities in humanitarian crises'. Wilton Park, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2019 <<https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/WP1641-Outcome-statement.pdf>>



# The pressure is on...

For Christians, the world is becoming more and more dangerous. In 2020, 260 million Christians now live in countries on the World Watch List top 50 where Christians are experiencing high levels of persecution<sup>15</sup> – an increase of 15 million from 2019. The reality on the ground is that more Christians are experiencing persecution than ever before, and that persecution is more extreme.

With very little change to the top ten, Christians living in North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, Pakistan, Eritrea, Sudan, Yemen, Iran, India and Syria continue to live in the most hostile environments that Christians have ever known. These are countries which score 81/100 persecution points or more and are designated as countries of 'extreme' persecution.

Christians in these countries experience extreme levels of violence and discrimination. The full and free exercise of the Christian faith is either extremely dangerous or prohibited within these states. In these contexts, churches may either be banned or under government control, and one's Christian identity can be enough to attract severe persecution.

Lower down the ranking, 45 of the 50 countries on the World Watch List are now countries where Christians are experiencing very high levels of persecution with a score of 61-80 persecution points. Only five of the top 50 countries remain in the 'high' level category in 2020.

## A closer look at two of the top ten World Watch List countries

**Pakistan (05):** Ranked once again at number five on the World Watch List, Pakistan continues to be an extremely difficult country in which to live as a

Christian. With a persecution score of 87/100, the country's notorious blasphemy laws continue to plague minority religious communities, including Christians, who make up approximately four million of Pakistan's 200 million-strong population.

In 2019, Christians around the world celebrated the release of Asia Bibi, who, after nine years in prison, was acquitted from a conviction that mandated the death penalty.<sup>16</sup> However, Christians have continued to receive death sentences for blasphemy during the 2020 World Watch List reporting period, with a Pakistani court sentencing two brothers, Qaisar and Amoon Ayub, to death for allegedly posting 'disrespectful material' online. The brothers were first arrested in 2014.<sup>17</sup>

**Eritrea (06):** Ranked at number six on the World Watch List, the country has been in the top ten since 2015. The country's government is a serious violator of the international right to freedom of religion or belief with Christians imprisoned, tortured and harassed on a large scale.

Thirty Christians in Eritrea were arrested in June 2019. They are members of a Pentecostal church – an unregistered and therefore illegal Christian denomination – and were arrested in three different gatherings across the capital, Asmara. A further 141 Christians were arrested in May 2019.

Police regularly raid the homes of Christians from unregistered denominations in Eritrea. Christians who have been arrested are often only released on the condition that they renounce their faith. In 2020, hundreds of members of unregistered churches remain in prison. Some have been held captive for more than a decade.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> If the Christians persecuted in countries outside the top 50 on the World Watch List were included here, this figure would be as high as 312 million.

<sup>16</sup> 'Pakistani top court rejects review, setting Christian woman Asia Bibi free' World Watch Monitor, 29 January 2019 <<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2019/01/pakistani-top-court-rejects-review-setting-christian-woman-asia-bibi-free/>>

<sup>17</sup> 'Two Pakistani Christian brothers sentenced to death for blasphemy' World Watch Monitor, 17 December 2018 <<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/12/two-pakistani-christian-brothers-sentenced-to-death-for-blasphemy/>>

<sup>18</sup> 'Church-run health centres shut down by Eritrea government' Open Doors UK & Ireland, 2019 <<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/eritrea-190719/>>

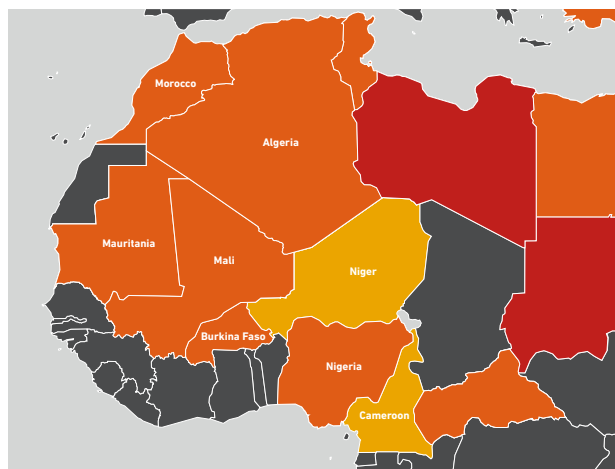
# Persecution spreads across Africa

## Heading west

If you look at a map of West Africa, the number of countries where it is safe to be a Christian is shrinking all the time.

Mali and Mauritania have been World Watch List entries for many years, but in the last two years several more West African countries have been added to the list. In 2019 Morocco re-entered the ranking, and in 2020 Burkina Faso and Cameroon joined for the first time in World Watch List history, with Niger returning to the List for the first time since 2016.

You can now travel from Morocco in the north west all the way to Cameroon in the south west without leaving the World Watch List (SEE MAP TO THE RIGHT).



## Islamic militancy in Africa

Burkina Faso has shot onto the World Watch List top 50 at number 28. In 2019, it was ranked outside the top 50 at number 61. Christians there say they are now in a fight for survival.<sup>19</sup> Violent Islamic militants have killed dozens of Catholic priests and murdered or kidnapped Protestant pastors and their families. These militants single out villagers wearing Christian symbols and kill them on the spot, burning down churches, shops and health centres.<sup>20</sup>

The following incident in April 2019 is typical. Militants on motorcycles arrived at a village church service. They confiscated all phones and identity cards and collected Bibles and burnt them before taking the pastor and six others outside to shoot them. Only one survived.<sup>21</sup>

In the north of the country, more than 200 churches



Juliana and her son had to flee their home due to pressure to convert from Christianity. Open Doors has helped her with an income-generating project so that she could start a small business



Persecuted Christians in Haoua, Cameroon receive letters of encouragement from Open Doors supporters

<sup>19</sup> Lowry, L., 'Why Christians in Burkina Faso are in a fight for survival', Open Doors USA, 20 June 2019 <<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/why-christians-in-burkina-faso-are-in-a-fight-for-survival/>>

<sup>20</sup> See 'Burkina Faso church leader killed by Islamists: 'I'd rather die than leave my community' World Watch Monitor, 2 May 2019, <<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2019/05/burkina-faso-church-leader-killed-by-islamists-id-rather-die-than-leave-my-community/>> and 'Burkina Faso: 5 leaders killed in 3 months as Islamists continue to target churches' World Watch Monitor, 16 May 2019 <<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2019/05/5-leaders-killed-in-3-months-as-islamists-continue-to-target-churches-in-burkina-faso/>>

<sup>21</sup> 'Burkina Faso Christians killed in attack on church' BBC, 29 April 2019 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-48094789>>



Christians in Burkina Faso have experienced intense violence throughout 2019. Pictured here are women receiving food parcels from Open Doors to help them survive





have closed and thousands of Christians have fled into camps, or have taken refuge with friends in the capital, Ouagadougou, or central and southern areas.<sup>22</sup>

In Mali, a potent mix of radical Islam is layered on top of deep-rooted regional and local conflicts. This moved Human Rights Watch's Sahel director to say in December 2018, "Militia killings of civilians in central and northern Mali are spiralling out of control."<sup>23</sup> Church life is dangerous with various radical Islamic groups controlling day-to-day activities.

In Cameroon, governance and security are the major problems. The country faces violence in the far north, which is still a stronghold of Boko Haram. Islamic radicalisation threatens the lives of displaced Christians and church activities are disrupted.<sup>24</sup> Female converts from Islam are coerced into marrying Muslims and also face the threat of abduction.<sup>25</sup> Cameroon is also one of the most corrupt nations on earth.

Even if Boko Haram is defeated, the extremist ideology of the Islamic militants is set to linger. A return to social harmony in the near future looks unlikely, as extremism has made deep inroads among youth in the region.

## Looking south

It is thought there are at least 27 named Islamist groups operating in different parts of sub-Saharan Africa. In Nigeria (ranked 12 on the 2020 World Watch List), the International Crisis Group has said that the violence from Muslim Fulani militants is six times as deadly as that carried out by Boko Haram.<sup>26</sup> The situation continues with ongoing attacks in the north and central region against farmers, churches and whole villages.

This violence against Christian-majority ethnic communities across Nigeria's mid-section is expanding into communities that were previously thought to be safe, such as Plateau State and even further south.

Radical Islamic ideology has inspired, or infiltrated, numerous splinter groups such as Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which broke away from Nigeria's Boko Haram. It gets local support by filling gaps in governance and service delivery. ISWAP fighters have beheaded Christian aidworkers and sent out videos saying they will kill every Christian they capture in revenge for Muslims killed in past religious conflicts in Nigeria.<sup>27</sup> They continue to hold women and girls, including Leah Sharibu, because she refuses to renounce her Christian faith.<sup>28</sup>

**> While there is much to do to combat persecution across Africa, if you are an MP please consider writing to the Foreign Secretary on the key issue of freeing Christian girls in Boko Haram captivity by urging the Nigerian President to: continue his efforts to liberate the hostages held by Boko Haram, including young Christian girls such as Leah Sharibu and the Chibok girls who are still being held. Urge him also to create a position within the Government for the sole purpose of maintaining an active family liaison and an open and accessible channel of communication with the traumatised parents of the hostages.**

<sup>22</sup> 'Suffering in the Sahel – Christians increasingly in the persecuted in sub-Saharan Africa' Open Doors UK & Ireland, 2019 <<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/mali-190712/>>

<sup>23</sup> 'Mali: Militias kill over 75 civilians' Human Rights Watch, 18 December 2018 <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/18/mali-militias-kill-over-75-civilians>>

<sup>24</sup> 'Four dead in Boko Haram church attacks', Open Doors UK & Ireland, 2019 <<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/cameroon-180125/>>

<sup>25</sup> 'Video: Rare footage shows Boko Haram attacks in Cameroon' Open Doors UK & Ireland, 2019 <<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/cameroon-190827/>>

<sup>26</sup> 'Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence', International Crisis Group, July 2018 <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/262-stopping-nigerias-spiralling-farmer-herder-violence>>

<sup>27</sup> 'Nigerian Islamist extremists kill aid worker 'for work for Red Cross', Christians 'slaves for life' World Watch Monitor, 16 October 2018 <<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/10/nigerian-islamist-extremists-kill-aid-worker-for-work-for-red-cross-christians-slaves-for-life/>>

<sup>28</sup> 'Leah Sharibu' World Watch Monitor, undated archive <<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/tag/leah-sharibu/>>



# See change

Global research conducted by Open Doors has revealed that millions of women from religious communities are specifically vulnerable. They are targeted both because of their gender and their faith. Their suffering is often hidden, and these women are often ignored by the world around them.

With little economic, social or political agency within their societies, it is difficult for women targeted on the basis of gender and faith to stand up to persecution. Far from being gender-blind, persecution exploits all the vulnerabilities specific to women.

In Egypt, where there has been a rise in the kidnapping of young Christian girls, 15-year-old Neveen was forced into a car by two men as she walked in her village. Her kidnapper forged her papers and married her, subjecting her to a life of hidden persecution.

An ex-kidnapper of Coptic Christian girls said, "Kidnappers of Christian girls rarely get arrested or brought to prosecution, and sometimes even the

police help in beating up the girls and forcing them to convert.

"Many girls are handed over to extremists," he continued. "The Salafist group I knew rented apartments in different areas of Egypt to hide kidnapped Coptic girls. They put them under pressure and threatened them to convert to Islam. And once they reach the legal age, an Islamic official comes in to legally change their religion. If all goes to plan, the girls are also forced into marriage with a strict Muslim... Their husbands don't love them, they just marry her to make her a Muslim. She will be hit and humiliated. And if she tries to escape, or convert back to her original religion, she will be killed."

The kidnappings makes the church fearful for their families. Any Christian father who has a daughter is hesitant to allow her to walk on the street alone. They will often go with their daughters or send the daughter's mother or brother to accompany her.

The targeted kidnapping, forced marriages and forced conversions of Christian girls in Egypt is



Pictured is a small 'dhaba' or cafeteria providing support to vulnerable women in rural India through the support of Open Doors

drastically debilitating for the whole Christian community. It drives fear into the family and the wider church. This is often the tactic of the persecutor – by targeting girls they know they are fragmenting families. This is a tactic to undermine the presence of the church in Egypt.

In response to this persecution, Open Doors has been running the See Change campaign. The vision is that every woman persecuted for her faith and gender is seen, valued and empowered to reach her God given potential. Open Doors is working practically on the ground to restore the hope, dignity and identity of such women who suffer persecution because of their Christian faith.

As part of this effort, Open Doors, through local faith actors, conducts trauma care for women in Syria, Iraq and Nigeria. In India, Open Doors has supported a group of Christian women from remote villages who have come together to set up a small 'dhaba' or cafeteria. This provides these women with economic empowerment, making them less exposed to those who wish to prey on their vulnerabilities. These are just some of the ways Open Doors is practically working to see change brought about for vulnerable Christian women across the world.

Beyond this practical work, Open Doors has also been campaigning to see change in policy and practice for these women.

In November 2019, Open Doors exhibited the Handmade Petition at the Chapter House, Westminster Abbey. The Handmade Petition consists of thousands of pieces of fabric each showing the name of an individual and the words 'I see you' which have been drawn or sewn onto the cloth. The purpose of the Handmade Petition is to counteract the invisibility and isolation these Christian women often experience. As these women's stories are often unheard, exhibiting the petition at the Chapter House gave an opportunity to put these women at the forefront of the public's mind.

Moving forward, Open Doors hopes to present the Handmade Petition formally to the UK government in 2020. In doing so, Open Doors will be calling



TOP Nigerian trauma care worker, Tirham interacting with the Handmade Petition exhibition at the Chapter House, Westminster Abbey, November 2019

BOTTOM Women at a programme run by Open Doors' partners in Bangladesh designing their pieces for the handmade petition

on the government to specifically recognise the vulnerabilities of women with minority religious identities.

The public's conscience is awakening to the breadth of sexual violence committed against women from





# Persecution goes digital

Technology has always played an important role in the fight against persecution. Open Doors beams radio programmes into North Korea, uses television programmes in Algeria to support Christians unable to attend church, and provides an 'encouragement app'<sup>29</sup> allowing Christians in the West to support Christians living under pressure across the Middle East. Technology is crucial in Open Doors' work to strengthen Christian communities under pressure all over the world.

But as much as technology can be a friend to the

persecuted church, it can also be an enemy. Open Doors estimates there are more than 90 million Christians in China today. To try to control that huge number, the state relies on technology to restrict forms of worship and Christian expression suspected of being disloyal to the regime. China and other authoritarian states are stepping up their use of biometric technology and artificial intelligence to suppress potential dissent.

In China, the situation for non-registered churches is difficult. Until recently, Beijing Zion Church was one



A house church gathering in China

<sup>29</sup> 'Messages for the Middle East' Open Doors UK & Ireland, undated <<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/act/letter/middle-eastern-believers/>>



of the capital's largest unofficial Protestant churches. The church was allowed to exist with relative freedom for many years, despite not having state-sanctioned official status.<sup>30</sup> The church grew, and in 2013 moved into a 25,800-square-foot property, investing \$608,000 of its own money into renovating the building for use as a church.<sup>31</sup>

However, strict religious regulation came into force in February 2018.<sup>32</sup> The landlord of the building informed Zion church that surveillance cameras would be installed in the two auditoriums and corridors. While Zion Church agreed to cameras in the hallways it refused to allow filming in its sanctuary. In response, the landlord informed the church that it would no longer honour its contract up to 2023. By September of that year, the church was banned and the building demolished.<sup>33</sup>

However, churches that are registered are not exempt from surveillance. These churches have not only had to take down their crosses and submit to continual bureaucratic monitoring, but are increasingly required to install cameras and facial-recognition technology.<sup>34</sup> In Hubei, at least one registered church is known to require congregants to queue for facial-recognition checks before services. This procedure has also been reported in other provinces in China.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, it is strictly forbidden for children under 18 to attend registered churches; this ban has been implemented countrywide, and with greater force in Henan where the percentage of Christians is among the highest.<sup>36</sup>

The authorities also drafted new guidelines to curb 'chaotic' online information on religion in September 2018.<sup>37</sup> This is particularly worrying for Christians living in remote areas of China who rely on online resources. Online sharing will be allowed only when the provincial religious affairs department has issued a licence for it.<sup>38</sup>

## Is India next?

Beyond China, biometric-based systems continue to make progress in India. In January 2020, the Indian government is due to introduce a national facial-recognition system, which it says will do no more than facilitate the work of the police.<sup>39</sup> However, there is concern that the technology may be used to target minority communities. Open Doors has reported at least 1,445 physical attacks and death threats against Christians in India in the 2020 World Watch List period, and notes a growing climate of impunity due to police inaction and even collusion.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the mass media continue to mischaracterise Christians as 'agents of the West'<sup>41</sup> and foreign funding for Indian NGOs continues to be closely scrutinised.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Shepherd, C., 'China outlaws large underground Protestant church in Beijing' 10 September 2018, Reuters <<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-china-religion/china-outlaws-large-underground-protestant-church-in-beijing-idUKKCN1LQ070>>

<sup>31</sup> Cheng, J., 'House Hunters', World Magazine, 5 July 2018 <[https://world.wng.org/2018/07/house\\_hunters](https://world.wng.org/2018/07/house_hunters)>

<sup>32</sup> See the legislation here: <[http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content\\_5223282.htm?from=timeline](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm?from=timeline)>

<sup>33</sup> Cheng, J., 'House Hunters', World Magazine, 5 July 2018 <[https://world.wng.org/2018/07/house\\_hunters](https://world.wng.org/2018/07/house_hunters)>

<sup>34</sup> Lowry, L., 'Fourth Large House Church in China Shut Down, Banned', Open Doors USA, 28 March 2019 <<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/fourth-large-house-church-in-china-shut-down-banned/>>

<sup>35</sup> 'Want to enter church? Scan your fingerprints and face', Bitter Winter, 21 December 2019 <<https://bitterwinter.org/want-to-enter-church-scan-your-fingerprints-and-face/>>

<sup>36</sup> 'China: children stopped from entering church as pressure on Henan Christians increases' World Watch Monitor, 9 May 2018 <<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/china-government-campaign-in-henan-stops-minors-from-entering-church/>>

<sup>37</sup> 'China to crackdown on 'chaotic' online religious info: media' Reuters, 11 September 2018 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-religion/china-to-crack-down-on-chaotic-online-religious-info-media-idUSKCN1LQ2QC?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>>

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*

<sup>39</sup> 'India's facial recognition plans anger privacy campaigners' Financial Times, 2019 <<https://www.ft.com/content/84fcd9b4-e006-11e9-9743-d5a370481bc>>

<sup>40</sup> 'We're Indians Too: An analysis of escalating human rights violations against religious minority communities in India', Open Doors, January 2019 <<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/about/how-we-help/advocacy/uk-india-resource-booklet.pdf>>

<sup>41</sup> Lee, M., 'India is not protecting its Christians' Christianity Today, 22 May 2019, <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/may-web-only/india-modi-elections-bjp-christians-persecution.html>>

<sup>42</sup> 'Praying for someone could mean a jail sentence for Indian Christians' Open Doors UK & Ireland, 26 September 2019 <<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/india-190926/>>

# Countries of special concern

## Burkina Faso (28)

Burkina Faso has stormed on to the World Watch List for the first time in the ranking's history, sitting at number 28. The country has seen relentless violence throughout the reporting period as Islamic militancy has taken hold within the country.<sup>43</sup>

In December 2019, armed men burst into a church in Hantoukura near the border with Niger. They killed the pastor and 13 other worshippers. This brought the total number of Christians killed during the year in nine attacks by Islamic militants to at least 50.

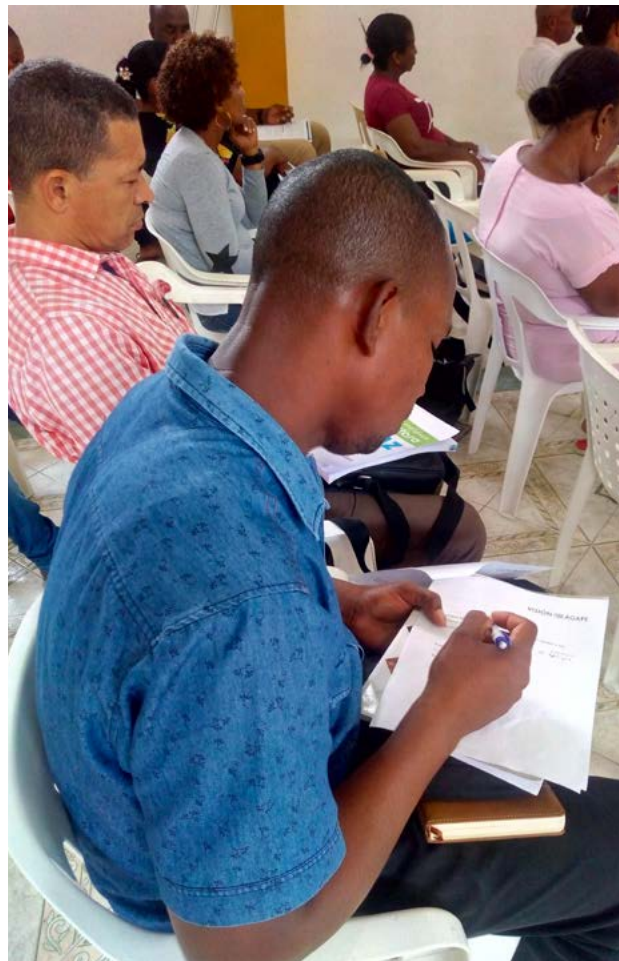
The Christian community in Burkina Faso has also come under pressure in other ways. Extremists have started expelling Christians, with villagers given an ultimatum: convert to Islam or leave your homes. Many thousands of the country's Christians are now living in camps for internally displaced people or seeking refuge with family and friends.

## Bangladesh (38)

Bangladesh was ranked at 48 on the 2019 World Watch List, rising to 38 in 2020. In theory a secular country, it has become an increasingly frightening place for Christians to live, particularly if you are a convert to Christianity. Religious minorities are monitored closely by extremist groups, family members and wider society. Converts to Christianity from both Islam and Buddhism (practised by indigenous groups along Bangladesh's border with India and Myanmar) are coming under mounting pressure. Bangladesh's violence score has increased in 2020 as a high number of Christians have been arrested and attacks against churches reported.

## Colombia (41)

Colombia has seen an upward trend in persecution



Christians taking part in a peace construction manual workshop in Colombia

points for the last three reporting periods. In 2017, Colombia was ranked at 50, moving to 49 in 2018 and to 47 in 2019. In 2020, Colombia has risen to 41. The re-grouping of the guerrilla movement FARC, which targets church leaders who challenge their authority, has played a large part in this rise.

In February 2019, Pastor Leider Molina was murdered as he finished preaching in his church in Cauca. He was hit by five bullets as he left the church. As armed groups fight for control of drug trafficking routes and the ownership of illicit crops, churches and church leaders are getting caught in the crossfire.

<sup>43</sup> For further reading on the situation in Burkina Faso see: Malley, R., '10 conflicts to watch in 2020' International Crisis Group, 27 December 2019 <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2020>>



In Bangladesh, Kakon and her family have been rejected by their wider family because they have converted to Christianity. Even the family's friends and neighbours call them derogatory names. Because of this, they have moved homes to a place where people do not know that they are converts





# Signs of hope



An adult education programme supported by Open Doors taking place in the Nuba Mountains, Sudan

## Kenya (44)

Mandera County is in the north-east of Kenya and borders with Somalia, sharing many characteristics with the country, including its hostility to Christians.

Christians have been killed in the region by al-Shabaab militants, including Christian teachers who have moved there from other parts of Kenya to contribute to this impoverished part of the country.

However, when Muslims in Mandera County heard about an imminent al-Shabaab attack against non-local, mostly Christian workers, they quickly helped them evacuate to safety. The attack was planned at a building site for a government hospital in Kutulo. The warning from local Muslims saved many lives.

North-eastern regional commissioner Mohamed Birik told media sources, "They confronted the gunmen, who failed to get what they wanted. [The attackers] opened fire but no one was injured before they escaped."<sup>44</sup>

## Sudan (07)

For the first time in decades, Christians in Sudan are no longer ruled by the dictatorial President Omar Al-Bashir, a serial violator of the international right to freedom of religion or belief. There is hope amongst Sudan's Christian community that greater freedoms may therefore become a reality.

At this fluid period in Sudan's history, matters are moving at a pace that nobody thought possible. There is hope that the demolition of churches, a regular occurrence under Bashir, may now cease and that a greater respect for the international right to freedom of religion or belief may emerge.

During this time of transition, the UK government should do everything in its power to encourage the Sudanese government to repeal or amend all articles in the country's 1991 Penal Code.

Chief among these are Articles 125 on blasphemy, 126 on apostasy and 152 on public decency – as

<sup>44</sup> 'Muslims save 20 Christians from deadly attack in Kenya' Open Doors UK & Ireland, undated <<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/kenya-190801/>>



well as all laws that violate Sudan's international commitments to freedom of religion or belief and related human rights.

## Laos (20)

Christians in many countries on the World Watch List face harassment because their faith is often associated with the West and former colonial powers. For instance, Christians in Laos are often portrayed as enemies of the state because they are associated with the American forces that bombed Laos in the 1960s and 70s.

To counter this, Open Doors has been working with Christians there to bring about a change of attitude. Anya is a church leader who has faced many challenges. Both he and his father have been

imprisoned for their faith.

But with support from Open Doors' partners, Anya has trained as a health care volunteer, helping to demonstrate that he isn't an enemy of Laos, but someone who wants to show love and care to his people.

In this rural part of Laos, where the nearest hospital or clinic may be two hours away, Anya can now provide the correct medicine for those with simple health care issues. He has also had training on more complex matters, such as how to safely deliver a baby. As a result, Anya has reported that the attitudes of those in his community are slowly beginning to change.



Participants at a Community Health Training workshop in Laos

# Open Doors advocacy

Open Doors UK and Ireland is part of a global NGO network which has supported and strengthened persecuted Christians in more than 60 countries for upwards of 60 years. The organisation's UK Advocacy Department is well-known at Westminster. It is in regular contact with ministers and civil servants at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development.

The Open Doors Advocacy team is active in three main spheres:

- Internationally: at the United Nations and at the European Union in Brussels and Strasbourg
- Nationally: in a number of key capitals, including London, Paris, Berlin and Washington DC
- Locally: at the grassroots, Open Doors provides legal support and human rights training for persecuted Christians. It has increasing numbers of advocacy field staff who provide an important link between the realities on the ground and the national and international advocacy teams.

As an NGO working with some of the most vulnerable communities around the world, Open Doors connects its field experience, on-the-ground intelligence and needs-assessment expertise with its advocacy work in the UK Parliament. This is to ensure Open Doors can speak up for those most in need and can communicate growing and emerging trends to decision makers.

The annual World Watch List plays an important role in Open Doors' advocacy, highlighting countries of special concern and key emerging trends. For instance, through its work with local partners and churches in more than 60 countries, Open Doors was able to identify the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women through research into the gender-dynamics of persecution. This has influenced changes in the field practices of Open Doors, which in turn will drive global advocacy in 2020 on the specific vulnerability of women from religious minorities. The



TOP Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Rehman Chishti discussing ways to bring about change on FoRB with Open Doors UK & Ireland Head of Advocacy, Matthew Rees

BOTTOM Each of the major parties showing their support for Open Doors during the 2019 General Election campaign.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT David Linden MP, Baroness Hussein-Ece, Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP and Rt Hon Theresa Villiers MP

aim is to mainstream an understanding of this into government and international policies tackling sexual violence in conflict.

**> If you are a member of parliament or a civil servant, or work for an NGO, and would like further information on what you have read, or require a briefing of any kind on the worldwide persecution of Christians, please contact Open Doors UK and Ireland's Advocacy Department by emailing [advocacy@opendoorsuk.org](mailto:advocacy@opendoorsuk.org)**

**You can also see the recommendations for action on p.31**

# The global campaign for Christians in India

India is a country desperate to prove itself as an emerging superpower.<sup>45</sup> With a population of more than one billion people, it vies with its counterpart, China. In 2019, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a resounding second term under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi. But the situation continues to deteriorate for the country's religious minorities.

Since the BJP's landslide victory, India has been in the news for its politically sensitive decisions, such as bringing to pass the Citizenship Amendment Act affecting India nationwide.<sup>46</sup> Public protests and police brutality to suppress these protests has come to the attention of the international media.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the National Register of Citizens enforced in the state of Assam could be the world's next refugee crisis.<sup>48</sup> India's democratic credentials are being questioned as the lockdown in Jammu and Kashmir continues.<sup>49</sup>

India's Freedom of Religion laws, or as they are more commonly referred to, anti-conversion laws,<sup>50</sup> have also created a growing sense of intimidation against minority faiths throughout 2019. These laws, which contradict Article 25 of the Indian Constitution, make it illegal in the eight states where they apply for non-Hindus to take part in conversion activities.<sup>51</sup> Despite this, Christians are frequently arrested for taking part in prayer meetings or for conducting regular church meetings.<sup>52</sup> There is discussion of a nationwide anti-conversion act.<sup>53</sup> The implications of this law would be huge for Christian minorities in

India who are already suffering at the hands of Hindu extremists.<sup>54</sup>

Take the case of Vikas. He converted from Hinduism after an encounter with a man from a neighbouring village who accompanied him to a church. However, as Vikas began sharing his faith with friends and neighbours, he started facing resistance from local Hindus. Vikas was threatened with physical violence or expulsion from the community. "I got a lot of threats. But I never stopped believing. My faith became so strong," Vikas said. Rather than being discouraged, he eventually became a pastor.

However, the persecution continued and became more severe. Three policemen interrupted a service where Vikas was praying for the congregation. They accused Vikas of speaking against their gods, and



Vikas, an Indian pastor, was arrested under 'anti-conversion' laws for conducting a night of prayer, despite this being a legal activity

<sup>45</sup> Rachman, G., 'Threats to minority rights and democratic norms are ignored to preserve a comforting illusion' Financial Times, 11 November 2019 <<https://www.ft.com/content/a4fe1974-0461-11ea-9afa-d9e2401fa7ca>>

<sup>46</sup> 'Citizenship Amendment Bill: India's new 'anti-Muslim' law explained' BBC, 11 December 2019 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-50670393>>3

<sup>47</sup> Ratcliffe R., Bhattacharya, K., 'India: almost 2m people left off Assam register of citizens' The Observer, 31 August 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/aug/31/india-almost-2m-people-left-off-assam-register-of-citizens>>

<sup>48</sup> Samuel, S., 'India's massive, scary new detention camps, explained' Vox News, 17 September 2019 <<https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2019/9/17/20861427/india-assam-citizenship-muslim-detention-camps>>

<sup>49</sup> Tisdall, S., 'Why Modi's Kashmir coup threatens India's democracy' The Observer, 10 August 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/10/modi-hardline-hindu-coup-kashmir-threatens-india-democracy>>

<sup>50</sup> See <<https://www.loc.gov/law/help/anti-conversion-laws/india.php>>

<sup>51</sup> Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhan, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarkhan, Arunachal Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The anti-conversion law in Arunachal Pradesh has not been fully implemented due to a lack of subsidiary rules and the state of Rajasthan has passed an anti-conversion bill, but it has yet to be signed by the President of India.

<sup>52</sup> We're Indians Too: An analysis of escalating human rights violations against religious minority communities in India, Open Doors, January 2019 <<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/about/how-we-help/advocacy/uk-india-resource-booklet.pdf>>

<sup>53</sup> 'India's anti-conversion law in five states, but proposed to go 'national' World Watch Monitor, undated, <<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/indias-anti-conversion-law-in-five-states-but-proposed-to-go-national/>>

<sup>54</sup> We're Indians Too: An analysis of escalating human rights violations against religious minority communities in India, Open Doors, January 2019 <<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/about/how-we-help/advocacy/uk-india-resource-booklet.pdf>>



Abishek (pictured here) is an Open Doors local church partner and 'rapid responder' in India. He responds to incidents against Christian families, providing both spiritual and practical support





illegally converting people to Christianity. But Vikas responded, “Ask the people who are here. I don’t force them to become Christians. These are people who need healing, so they come here.”

On this occasion, the police left because nobody would testify against Vikas. However, he wasn’t so fortunate on another occasion. As Vikas recounted, “One night I was conducting a night of prayer. There were about 50 people who came for healing. I prayed for them.” That’s when the police came to arrest him.<sup>55</sup>

This is one example of an ‘anti-conversion’ law being misused to arrest Christians carrying out normal services. This type of discrimination has a paralysing effect on the Christian community in India. It wears the community down, and makes individuals nervous about taking part in everyday Christian activity.

The spread of violent Hindu extremism in India is leading to a grave setback in the country’s record on religious freedom. Hate speech and hate crimes continue to increase.<sup>56</sup> Open Doors’ 2019 *We’re Indians Too* report found that the eight states that have anti-conversion laws account for more incidents of violence against Christians than all the other 21 states combined.<sup>57</sup> The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)<sup>58</sup> now considers India a ‘Tier 2’ country which has yet to observe minimum standards and will be observed closely in light of the growing violations of freedom of religion or belief in the country.

## What can be done?

Open Doors sensed the growing need to advocate on behalf of Christians in India well before the situation escalated. In 2018, Open Doors initiated a two-year global campaign to bring the growing religious intolerance and hatred towards its minorities to the forefront of politicians and decision makers worldwide.

Decisive action by decision makers can make a difference to the escalating situation in India. Minorities increasingly feel they don’t have rights. The plight of Christians will continue to deteriorate unless urgent action is taken.

If you are an MP, please ask the UK government to do all it can to persuade the Indian government and sub-state governments that anti-conversion laws are counterproductive. To prevent the currently extensive misuse of the ‘anti-conversion laws’ and the misinterpretation of specific sections of the Indian penal code, the UK government should:

1. Expand interactions and contact with parliamentarians and state-level officials in India where such laws exist, and encourage local governments to repeal these laws, or, alternatively, reform them to narrowly define terms such as ‘force’, ‘fraud’, ‘inducement’ and ‘allurement’ and what is meant by ‘improper conversion’
2. Reform the laws in a way that they apply equally to all religions
3. Create a legal deterrence mechanism to prevent and punish false accusations of ‘improper conversions’.

<sup>55</sup> Vikas: Arrested in India for praying, and released through your support’ Open Doors, undated <<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/india-190626/>>

<sup>56</sup> Regan, H., Gupta, S., ‘Indian authorities failed to stop ‘cow vigilante’ violence: report’, CNN, 21 February 2019 <<https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/20/asia/india-cow-vigilante-hrw-report-intl/index.html>>

<sup>57</sup> ‘We’re Indians Too: An analysis of escalating human rights violations against religious minority communities in India’, Open Doors, January 2019, p.24 <<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/about/how-we-help/advocacy/uk-india-resource-booklet.pdf>>

<sup>58</sup> See ‘India’ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom <<https://www.uscifr.gov/countries/india>>

# Methodology

The annual World Watch List is the product of year-round research conducted by Open Doors' World Watch Research unit. The unit analyses both primary and secondary data to ensure a rigorous and nuanced understanding of the persecution of Christians worldwide and to rank the 50 countries where it is most dangerous to live as a Christian in 2020.<sup>59</sup>

The World Watch Research Unit works closely with researchers in the field to collect survey data. This is designed to tease out the state of religious freedom for Christians in five areas of life: private, family, community, national and within the church. These five areas comprise the non-violent element of persecution – the daily pressure of official discrimination, hostile attitudes and family rejection. Separately, the team measures violence against Christians. This is the violent element of persecution, one that often commands headlines but which rarely is the dominant reality for Christians who live in World Watch List countries.

For each country surveyed, scores for the six categories are combined to create a total out of a possible hundred. Those scores determine the country's ranking on the World Watch List. Only verified accounts of persecution are analysed, with many incidents in countries such as North Korea, Libya and Myanmar going unrecorded due to the difficulty in verifying reports in these places.

It is therefore likely that the research findings underestimate the real figures. However, Open Doors has consistently chosen to under-report rather than over-report in order to ensure the highest levels of credibility and reliability.

Following primary research, the survey data is analysed against secondary data. Researchers scour academic, NGO and news reports to ensure the survey data is as rigorous and reliable as possible. Further to this, academics and other external experts with specialist knowledge on the countries surveyed are asked to comment and input into the findings. The research methods for arriving at country scores and comparisons have also been independently audited by the International Institute for Religious Freedom.

This three-pronged approach ensures the experience of the persecuted church is carefully triangulated with academic, expert and media analysis, leading to well-rounded, nuanced and accurate research findings.

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<sup>59</sup> 150 countries are assessed for persecution levels in the overall study.



# Recommendations

## To combat escalating persecution...

We urge the **Department for International Development** (DfID) to recognise religion as a factor of vulnerability in any assessment made in its programming around the world.

Because of the unique value provided by local faith actors in development contexts, we urge the UK government, and crucially **DfID**, to recognise local faith actors as a resource which should be utilised in its development programming.

Key to this is the need for a conversation about how local faith actors could accept funding from DfID. There is also need for a discussion around the likely capacity building needed within faith-based organisations and local faith actors, so that they can adequately roll out development work and report its impact. There is also a need to acknowledge that a local faith actor is unlikely to differentiate between aid and development work and everyday spiritual and pastoral work.

We urge the UK government to recognise that women from minority religious communities are specifically vulnerable to sexual violence. In light of this, the UK government should recognise faith in the work and outputs of the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative in 2020.

## To support the work of the Special Envoy...

We welcome the continuing role of the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and the ongoing work of the Envoy and his team in implementing the recommendations of the Truro review.

Christians in many countries on the World Watch List face harassment because their faith is often associated with the West and former colonial powers. Because of this, the **Foreign and**

**Commonwealth Office** (FCO) should put together a task force, headed by the Prime Minister's FoRB Envoy to consider strategies for overcoming this toxic rhetoric around the world.

## To combat the growing crisis in Nigeria...

With the escalating crisis in northern Nigeria, we encourage the **FCO** to work strategically with the government and civil service of Nigeria and to prioritise engagement on FoRB in the country. This should be done by liaising and working with the Nigerian Army Human Rights Desk, and supporting a holistic approach to ensure a process of deradicalisation in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states. This would involve supporting and funding community-focused programmes of civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations in the region addressing the socio-economic factors that contribute to the spread of extremism.

## With the UK leaving the EU...

The **UK government** should take any potential opportunity presented by future trade negotiations with World Watch List countries to champion human rights, in particular the right to FoRB. This should be done by ensuring that human rights expertise is included in every trade delegation.

## To parliamentarians...

We ask **parliamentarians** to write to the Foreign Secretary, the Secretary of State for International Development and the Prime Minister to highlight the key findings of this report.

**> If you would like to find out how you can get involved with the campaign to combat the extreme persecution of Christians worldwide, contact [advocacy@opendoorsuk.org](mailto:advocacy@opendoorsuk.org)**

# THE 2020 OPEN DOORS WORLD WATCH LIST



- |               |                |                            |              |                         |
|---------------|----------------|----------------------------|--------------|-------------------------|
| ① North Korea | ⑪ Syria        | ⑳ Vietnam                  | ⑳ Tajikistan | ④① Colombia             |
| ② Afghanistan | ⑫ Nigeria      | ㉑ Turkmenistan             | ⑳ Nepal      | ④② Oman                 |
| ③ Somalia     | ⑬ Saudi Arabia | ㉒ China                    | ⑳ Jordan     | ④③ Kuwait               |
| ④ Libya       | ⑭ Maldives     | ㉓ Mauritania               | ⑳ Tunisia    | ④④ Kenya                |
| ⑤ Pakistan    | ⑮ Iraq         | ㉔ Central African Republic | ㉓ Kazakhstan | ④⑤ Bhutan               |
| ⑥ Eritrea     | ⑯ Egypt        | ㉕ Morocco                  | ⑳ Turkey     | ④⑥ Russian Federation   |
| ⑦ Sudan       | ⑰ Algeria      | ㉖ Qatar                    | ㉓ Brunei     | ④⑦ United Arab Emirates |
| ⑧ Yemen       | ⑱ Uzbekistan   | ㉗ Burkina Faso             | ㉓ Bangladesh | ④⑧ Cameroon             |
| ⑨ Iran        | ⑲ Myanmar      | ㉘ Mali                     | ㉓ Ethiopia   | ④⑨ Indonesia            |
| ⑩ India       | ⑳ Laos         | ㉙ Sri Lanka                | ④① Malaysia  | ④⑩ Niger                |

- Extreme levels of persecution   
 ● Very high levels of persecution   
 ● High levels of persecution



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