



**WORLD
WATCH
LIST
2022**

**THE SUFFOCATING
STRUGGLE**

DAILY LIFE OF PERSECUTED
CHRISTIANS

PARLIAMENTARY REPORT



The suffocating struggle: daily life of persecuted Christians

Based on extensive research of almost 100 countries, Open Doors annual World Watch List outlines the countries where Christians face the most intense persecution, and provides insight into the trends and dynamics of this persecution. The 2022 report highlights how an upsurge of jihadism and a growing authoritarianism are relegating many Christians to the status of second-class citizens, and how the church is increasingly displaced or on the move due to rising persecution and discrimination.

Cover picture: Farah, whose first name only is provided for her safety, is a doctoral student and a prominent activist for women's rights in Kabul, Afghanistan. Since the reinstatement of the Taliban rule, she has been constantly on the move in order to continue protesting for human rights without being captured. Many persecuted Christians in Afghanistan are also on the move to prevent the Taliban from discovering their faith. This photo was taken on 15 September 2021 | © Getty

Contents

Introduction	3
The Top Ten	4
Key findings	5
Afghanistan - the emboldening of jihadist movements	7
West Africa - an unfolding pattern of violence	9
India - the destructive lies of Hindu nationalism	13
The suffocating struggle	16
China - autocracy, technology and digital persecution	18
Countries of concern	21
Stories of hope	23
The persecution of Christian women	25
The challenge to the UK government	28
Recommendations	29
Open Doors advocacy	30
Research methodology	31
World Watch List	32

Introduction

Shortly after the Taliban took over in Afghanistan, following the withdrawal of US troops in August 2021, we received the following message from an Afghan Christian:

“The Taliban want their ideology reflected everywhere, and so all signs of colour, life and hope have been removed... Memories of the past came rushing back. The Taliban are killing our souls and spirits. They don't have to shoot us for this to be painful and hard, but they will shoot us. They are killing the souls of our children by taking all that is beautiful away from them.

“They may try to stop us, but I doubt we can stop the movement of beauty and hope that was begun when we gave vulnerable people access to skills... We know you will help us by living the gospel, using your freedom and sharing Jesus with those who have come to your neighbourhoods. Please continue to stand with us.”

Afghanistan is now an extremely dangerous country in which to be a Christian, taking the top slot from North Korea which has held that dubious honour for the last 20 years. This reversal is sadly not a result of North Korea becoming safer for Christians - it has scored higher this year than ever before. But our research reveals that whereas in North Korea Christians will be imprisoned, in Afghanistan they are likely to be executed more swiftly.

And tragically the rise of the Taliban has encouraged other Islamic extremists who now feel they can prevail through persistence. Jihadist violence has increased, taking advantage of corrupt and weakened governments and the apparent lack of international will to promote and protect human rights. Patterns which began to emerge a few years ago are now intensifying and Islamism is gaining ground across West Africa.

Open Doors has long recognised that religious liberty is like the canary in the coalmine for all our other human rights. When this freedom is violated, many others disappear with it. But perhaps most worrying of all this year is not just a rise in the violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief, but the increasing absence of any regard for human rights at all. Governments are becoming more totalitarian, using technology to oppress Christians and other minorities. China's model of centralised control of religion is becoming more influential. As they export the ideology and technology of oppression, their model is emulated in countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Malaysia. The Covid crisis has continued to be used as a cover to weaken the church, and churches in some countries remain closed even though other Covid restrictions have been lifted.

But there is always hope. On 3 November 2021 Iran's Supreme Court decided that belonging to a house church does not make Christians 'enemies of the state'. This ruling will give Christians – and thousands of others across Iran – hope that they may now be able to worship together in their homes without fear of imprisonment.

We continue to urge the UK Government and all Parliamentarians to seize the opportunities available to them to uphold FoRB. The Bishop of Truro's review of UK support to persecuted Christians is due for review in 2022 and in July the UK will also host the international Ministerial on FoRB. See all our recommendations for action on page 29.

Thank you for reading this report. And thank you for everything you do to promote and protect Freedom of Religion or Belief.



Henrietta Blyth
Open Doors UK & Ireland CEO

The Top Ten

The ten most difficult and dangerous countries in the world in which to be a Christian in 2022

1 AFGHANISTAN

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan Christians have had to flee or go into hiding. Those whose names are known to the Taliban are being hunted down. If men are discovered to have a Christian faith they are executed. If women are discovered, they may escape execution but face a life of slavery or imprisonment.

2 NORTH KOREA

There is no religious freedom in North Korea. The regime keeps a watchful eye on all citizens. If Christians are discovered, they and their families are deported to labour camps as political criminals or killed on the spot. Gathering with other Christians is therefore almost impossible and must only be attempted in utmost secrecy.

3 SOMALIA

Christians in Somalia are under extreme threat. They are explicitly targeted by the terrorist jihadist group, al-Shabaab, often being killed immediately upon discovery. Even being suspected of being a convert to Christianity means life-threatening danger. Anyone found in possession of a Bible or other printed Christian material is executed with the blessing of their relatives and community.

4 LIBYA

In lawless Libya, various radical Islamist groups and organised criminal groups target Christians to exploit, kidnap, rape, enslave and kill, with impunity. When attacks are carried out on Christian converts by family members, it is considered a matter of honour.

5 YEMEN

Yemeni converts to Christianity run the risk of honour killing or physical violence if their families or communities discover their faith. New converts whose faith is exposed face pressure to recant. Refusing to do so can lead to, at best, imprisonment or violence, and at worst, death.

6 ERITREA

The government has refused to recognise any religious groups except the Eritrean Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran churches and Sunni Islam.

Christians who have left the historical Christian communities (especially the Orthodox Church) to join non-traditional congregations, and Muslims who have converted to Christianity can face serious violence, intolerance and discrimination. Non-traditional Christian communities such as Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are regarded by the government as agents of the West.

7 NIGERIA

Christians endure a suffocating combination of Islamic oppression, ethno-religious hostility, dictatorial paranoia and organised corruption and crime. Most violence against civilians, especially Christians, occurs in the north (including the Middle Belt) and is perpetrated by Boko Haram, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), Fulani militants and armed 'bandits'. In raids, Christian men are kidnapped or killed, while Christian women are abducted, raped and forcibly married as part of the mission to depopulate Christian-majority territories.

8 PAKISTAN

Christians are victims of roughly a quarter of all blasphemy accusations despite being less than two per cent of the population. Girls and young women continue to be abducted, forcefully married and converted. All Christians suffer from institutionalised discrimination; occupations seen as low and dirty are reserved for Christians by the authorities.

9 IRAN

Converts from Islam to Christianity bear the brunt of religious freedom violations. Leaders and members of Christian house churches have been arrested, prosecuted and given long prison sentences for 'crimes against national security'.

10 INDIA

Since Modi became Prime Minister, the annual reported number of violent attacks against Christians has increased dramatically. India's state-level 'anti-forced-conversion' laws have been enacted to regulate religious conversions, and are misused to punish Christians by falsely accusing them.

Key findings

- **The persecution of Christians has reached the highest levels since the World Watch List began nearly 30 years ago.** Across 76 countries, more than 360 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith – an increase of 20 million since last year. In the World Watch List top 50 alone, 312 million Christians face very high or extreme levels of persecution worldwide. Globally, one in every seven Christians live under at least 'high' levels of persecution or discrimination for their faith
- **The total number of Christians killed for their faith rose from 4,761 in 2021 to 5,898 in 2022.** This is an increase of 24 per cent. Again Nigeria contributed most to the total: 4,650 or 79 per cent of the recorded killings were in Nigeria alone. Pakistan came second with 11 per cent (620 Christians killed)
- **The triumph of the Taliban has boosted other jihadist groups and extremism in Africa and Asia.** Islamist groups now feel more justified and confident in their strategies of terrorism and violent attrition. Perceiving a lack of international will to promote and protect human rights, they are intensifying and expanding their activities
- **Across the world, the church is increasingly 'displaced' or 'refugee' – adding to its vulnerabilities.** As populations flee extremist violence large-scale crises of refugee/displaced people are unfolding. Many Christians fleeing persecution are among the world's 84 million forcibly displaced people (UNHCR 2021). In sub-Saharan Africa, jihadism threatens to destabilise the region, creating a vast humanitarian crisis. Displaced and refugee Christians in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan face discrimination. Christians are also often placed in grave danger when forcibly returned to the country from which they have fled. In Myanmar, 200,000 Christians have been displaced and 20,000 have fled
- **Religious nationalism continues to rise as a driver for the persecution of Christian minorities.** In India (10), the anti-conversion laws have been accompanied by violence from Hindu extremists. Following the military coup,

nationalism in Myanmar has led to a leap of six places to No.12. Christians have experienced attacks by government forces, especially in Chin state, and many are now living in conditions described as 'truly awful'.

Key changes

- After the US-led withdrawal of forces, Afghanistan has moved to No.1 in the World Watch List, making it an extremely dangerous place to be a Christian. Most Christians in Afghanistan are converts from Islam. Consequently, Christian men who are discovered face death, while women and girls face slavery and servitude
- Despite moving to No.2 after 20 years at the top of the list, **North Korea** has reached its highest level ever for persecution. Alongside an increase in violence against Christians, a new 'anti-reactionary thought law' has increased the number of Christians arrested and number of house churches discovered and closed
- **Nigeria**, which has risen two places to No.7. With an upsurge of Islamist violence, other countries across West Africa have also risen on the World Watch List, including **Mali** and **Niger**, with the point score rising for **Burkina Faso** and **Cameroon**
- In the Gulf of Arabia daily life for Christians is becoming more difficult, with **Saudi Arabia** moving to No.11 from No.14, **Qatar** moving to No.18 from No.29, and **Oman** jumping from No.44 to No.36
- **Indonesia**, the most populous Muslim-majority country in the world, with approximately 231 million adherents, rose from No.47 to No.28 due to violent Islamist attacks
- **Cuba** entered the top 50 this year. After mass protests in July, Catholic and Protestant leaders who spoke out for democracy and human rights were detained, tortured and fined excessively.



Girls walk past a Taliban fighter at a market in Kabul, Afghanistan | © REUTERS/Zohra Bensemra



An Afghan man scavenges for items among rubbish in Kabul, Afghanistan | © REUTERS/Zohra Bensemra

Afghanistan - the emboldening of jihadist movements



For religious minorities in Afghanistan, the small and hard-won gains for religious freedom of the last 20 years have now been lost. Following the calamitous withdrawal of US forces in August 2021, the Afghan Constitution, which guaranteed that adherents of other religions are free to exercise their faith, has been suspended by the Taliban.

Open Doors ranks Afghanistan as the most dangerous and deadly place to be a Christian. This is despite the fact that in North Korea – a country with the dubious distinction of heading the World Watch List for 20 years – persecution has actually increased to its highest recorded level. This change is largely attributable to the fact that, while those identified as Christians in North Korea may momentarily escape death by being sent to labour camps, in Afghanistan, the most likely outcome for a male follower of Jesus is execution. Women and girls identified as Christians may be enslaved or imprisoned.

Almost all Afghan Christians are converts from Islam and are not able to practise their faith openly. Leaving Islam is considered shameful and is punishable by death under the prevailing Islamic law. If exposed, Christian converts must flee the country or face martyrdom. After Taliban rule was restored, many went into hiding because, as apostates, there is an expectation that the family, clan or tribe must save its 'honour' by disposing of any Christians.

With the Taliban's grip on power growing stronger, the situation for Christian converts is precarious. Following reports of house-to-house searches, many Christian converts have sought to flee abroad. Others have been caught by the Taliban.

The Christian converts who remain will have to adapt and conform to the rigid form of society imposed. They will have to continue to exist as 'secret believers' – maintaining a public appearance as Muslims, but privately worshipping as Christians. However, the communal nature of the Afghan family unit leaves little room for privacy, which means a high risk of discovery and severe compulsion from within the clan structure and the wider community.

Connecting with other Christians is especially dangerous. There is no visible church in Afghanistan, so Christian groups (however small) have gone underground and meetings are covert. Often, this means that church ceremonies simply look like a group of people meeting over a meal. All Bibles and Christian material have to be hidden from prying eyes. If discovered, the owners of those materials would face violence or serious consequences from the local *jirga* court.

In Afghanistan, although women and girls may be enslaved or imprisoned, the most likely outcome for a male follower of Jesus is execution

Many men and boys face severe pressure and violence from their families if their faith is discovered. The Taliban pressurises men to show that they are good Muslim heads of the family by praying five times a day, attending mosques, fasting and wearing a 'proper' beard. Men face ridicule, imprisonment, torture, sexual abuse and potentially death because of their faith. Men and boys also become targets for militias seeking to coerce them into joining their fighter groups. Male converts must often find alternative sources of income in order to avoid exposure by refusing to take part in religious practices in the marketplace. If discovered, they will experience harsh discrimination from the employment authorities, leaving them and their dependents financially vulnerable.

At the time of writing, the vast majority of girls in Afghanistan are banned from returning to school and there are many reports of women being pressured to dress 'properly' and stay at home. Christian women's faith makes them vulnerable to persecution. Converts can be divorced or put under house arrest. They can be sold into slavery or prostitution, beaten severely, forced to marry a Muslim (in an attempt to re-convert them), or sexually abused.

Zabi's story

"I grew up in Afghanistan and was very well educated. My family are secret believers; well, my father and brother and me. My mother remained a Muslim. A few years ago, the Taliban came and took my father away, because he was a Christian. They tortured him for months and then they killed him. A few months later, my brother also disappeared. We never heard of him again.

"In the meantime, I continued to serve international organisations who were active in our country. When the Taliban took over in August, they departed and I was left behind. My mother and I managed to cross the border into another country.

"Our situation is desperate. I have money in my bank account, but cannot access it from here. I have a visa but it will expire soon. What will happen to me? I don't know. I'm praying I can leave this country and go somewhere safe. I may have to go into hiding. Or I'll be deported to Afghanistan. I may be killed if that happens. We don't have food or extra clothes. We cannot pay the rent of the apartment.

"I feel alone and hopeless. I worked for those international organisations for years and now they don't help me? What am I supposed to do? I feel depressed, if I'm honest. I can only think about survival. How are my mother and me going to live? Thank God for your food and clothes deliveries, your financial support and your prayers and encouragement. You are a strand of hope to me. There's a chance I may live."

A frontline partner tells us about Zabi: "She's very depressed. She's grateful for the support, but it's like being happy that someone showed up to the funeral of a loved one. You're happy this person is there, but you're still overwhelmed with grief. It's the same for her. She's so thankful that we're helping, but at the same time, she's still in shock about what happened. It's difficult for her to express what has happened and how she feels. We just have to be with her and help her where we can. And we pray that God opens a door for her so that she and her mother can be safe."

Alongside the impact on religious and ethnic minorities, as well as on women, the US withdrawal has had a number of serious consequences for the persecution of Christians beyond Afghanistan. With so many fleeing the country, neighbouring Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Iran have experienced waves of displaced and desperate people. For Christians escaping the Taliban, those who did not secure emergency air transport to safe havens find themselves in an especially dangerous situation because all these surrounding countries are in the top 50 of the World Watch List for persecution. Many Christians are among the 2.2 million Afghans who have fled to refugee camps along the border. The UN estimates that 3.5 million people are now internally displaced. Additionally, the collapse of Afghanistan's economy has led the UN to estimate that 23 million people will soon face acute food insecurity,¹ which means that further substantial waves of refugees can be expected, exacerbating national, religious and tribal tensions in this already volatile region.

Perhaps most significantly, both within and beyond the region, the triumph of the Taliban has emboldened jihadists globally. It has affirmed the belief that, regardless of the might of opposition, success will eventually be secured through campaigns of violence and aggression. Whether the jihadists are groups with links to the Taliban, such as the Haqqani network, al-Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia, Boko Haram in West Africa, and al-Shabaab in East Africa, or rival terror networks such as ISIS, ISIS-K and ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province), all have been bolstered by events in Afghanistan.

¹ 'UN Warns That More Than Half of Afghans Face 'Acute' Food Shortages', Gandhara, 25 October 2021

West Africa - an unfolding pattern of violence



Across West Africa Christians are experiencing both the squeeze and the smash of persecution, the discrimination and the violence. Daily they encounter a variety of pressures that affect every sphere of their lives (private, family, community, church and national). They are also experiencing concerted waves of violent persecution, which threaten the presence of the church in strategic sub-Saharan African regions.

To understand the vicious nature of the persecution in West Africa it is worth noting that, if violence against Christians alone was the measure for the World Watch List, Nigeria (7) would be at No.1; and Mali (24), Burkina Faso (32), Niger (33) and Cameroon (44) would all be in the top 13.

The vast majority of this violence stems from Islamist groups. And though they don't all go by the same name all are motivated by the same ideology, and all appear to pursue a similar strategy. In countries which suffer from corruption and weak government, these radical groups mount brutally violent attacks to bring chaos and instil fear. This shatters and scatters communities, and over time cleanses the land of 'infidels'. In Nigeria, the former Head of Naval Intelligence, Professor of Global Security Studies, Commodore Kunle Olawunmi describes what is happening as a strategy of 'Talibanisation' – a deliberate, religiously motivated degrading of security and order in which state actors and tribal groups are also complicit.²

In the past few years, hundreds of churches have been closed in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – added to in 2021 by 470 church closures in Nigeria alone. Across the region, the steady exodus of young people of Christian or moderate Muslim backgrounds leaves a 'diversity deficit' which further weakens churches and civil society alike. With more than 416 million people living in West Africa (206 million in Nigeria), the escalating terror has the potential to cause a vast humanitarian disaster. This would bring unprecedented migration crises to Africa and Europe.



Hajaratu is a Christian widow from Nigeria. Fulani militants overtook her village, and she lost her possessions, grain stores, animals and parts of her home. Open Doors partners helped Hajaratu to not only survive, but to live fruitfully despite the attacks

² Insecurity: The Govt Knows Sponsors Of Boko Haram, Says Former Naval Chief, 25 August 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KyHowYHyAp8>



After attacks by Boko Haram in North Cameroon, Fadi and her family were among 449 families that received urgent relief aid from Open Doors partners

Fadi's story

After a series of Boko Haram attacks, Fadi fled with her family, apart from her 14-year-old sister Vusa who was kidnapped:

"When my mother heard this information, she did not know how to deal with it. After two weeks she died, because she was brooding too much about how we left our village. And she witnessed [that] many of our neighbours, they

killed them. She saw them, their blood on the ground. And then they kidnapped her daughter. So, she got hypertension and she died."

Although Fadi escaped, she is not unscathed. "Even when I want to sleep, I can't. Many things come like a vision or dreams. And every time I am crying because I am an orphan. My father has died, and the BH (Boko Haram) kidnapped my sister, and my mother also died. I am the only one."

Nigeria lies at the heart of the persecution problem in West Africa. Increasing levels of insecurity play out along religious and ethnic lines, fostering severe violations of fundamental rights. And given the lack of will from Western governments to identify and address the root religious causes of the violence, persecution is growing. It is spreading with the expansion of terrorist groups like Boko Haram/ ISWAP in the northeast, violence and abductions by armed bandits in the northwest, and the increasing

violence in the Middle Belt at the hands of Fulani militants/jihadists. These are now also operating in the south, with reports of violence in the southwest, and even the southeast of Nigeria.

In neighbouring **Cameroon**, during the first seven months of 2021, Open Doors distributed emergency aid to more than 3,000 Christians. This aid helps Christian leaders supporting displaced and traumatised church members, like Fadi Zara.

Terror attacks, often carried out by groups affiliated to al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State are increasing in **Niger**. In November 2021, a delegation led by the mayor of Banibangou was attacked in the western Tillabéri region, near the border with Mali. Sixty-nine people died. In the same month, it was reported that heavily armed attackers clashed with soldiers stationed outside the village of Dagne near the border with Mali, killing 11. Human Rights Watch estimated in August 2021 that more than 420 civilians had been killed since the beginning of 2021 in western Niger.

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From 1992, when **Mali** adopted a new constitution, signifying a successful transition to democratic rule, the country was considered exemplary among African nations for protecting civil liberties. However, since an Islamist insurgency and coup in 2012, many freedoms gained by moderate and tolerant Muslims have been lost. Although Christians only account for 2.3 per cent of the population in Mali, the persecution level has now been categorised as 'severe'. Since the imposition of Sharia (Islamic law) in the north and attacks by al-Qaeda and IS-linked groups in the Mopti region in central Mali, churches have been demolished and Christians assaulted. Southern Mali is now also facing increasing pressure from Wahhabi groups. Additionally, Christian missionaries (especially foreigners) are considered prime targets by Islamist groups and are under constant threat of abduction.

Burkina Faso, once known for peaceful relations between Christians and Muslims, is today seeing moderate Muslim communities being attacked by jihadists. Many churches and Christian organisations which provide essential social services, including schools, are being closed. Since 2016, the country has experienced an alarming escalation of violence, in which the Burkinabe government lost control of territories in the north and northeast to jihadist groups, infiltrating from neighbouring Mali. These groups continue to move between borders for their attacks and operations. Militant Islamist groups

operating in the country include Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine and Boko Haram.

The growing influence of these groups in the central and eastern regions has seen a rise in the persecution of Christian women. They may be forced into marriage, used as forced labour, and put under intense pressure to convert to Islam. Sexual violence is a common tool for attacking Christian communities. Daughters of Christian leaders are particular targets for abduction, rape and seduction. Converts from Islamic or traditional religious backgrounds face further pressure, including forced marriage, denial of education, family expulsion, death threats, and house arrest.

Islamist militant groups operating in the Sahel region often forcefully recruit their members from countries such as Burkina Faso. The abduction and killing of Christian men causes fear and trauma in Christian communities, as well as economic fragility, as men are normally the family providers. Many men and boys flee to safer areas, neighbouring countries or abroad.

Burkina Faso, once known for peaceful relations between Christians and Muslims, is today seeing moderate Muslim communities being attacked by jihadists

Once lauded internationally and regionally as a beacon of religious tolerance, Burkina Faso has jumped onto the WWL at No.28 in 2020. With the government also accused of indiscriminate attacks against civilians from specific ethnic groups, the crisis is now threatening the social cohesion of the country. Today, as hopes for freedom fade, that persecution has caused a humanitarian disaster, with more than a million people being displaced.

Pastor Pengdwende's story

Pastor Pengdwende used to care for a congregation in Bobo-Dioulasso in southwestern Burkina Faso. Under the ever-growing danger of jihadist attacks, he was compelled to leave his home and congregation and join throngs of other Christians who were displaced. He tells how moderate Muslims and Christians are being attacked, and how Christian pastors and their families have become the main targets of the terrorists:

"In my village the terrorists came to one of my uncles. They entered my uncle's house and shot him three times. He received one bullet in his abdomen, the second in his shoulder, and the third just brushed his head. They left thinking he was dead. We brought him to hospital – and he survived. Another pastor from our area ran into terrorists as he was coming back from a funeral and was killed. The third case was also my neighbouring village pastor. He and his family left the village. He returned to collect some of his things that remained in his house. They found him there and killed him. After all that, they came again to another village not far from ours, to the

Catholic church and killed five persons. From there they continued to the Assemblies of God church of the same village. The pastor hid in a toilet. They asked the pastor's wife where he was, and she said that he went out. At that moment, a sick man arrived at that place, and thinking that he was the pastor, they shot him dead."

Eventually, Pastor Pengdwende and many others were forced to flee their villages. Now supported by Open Doors partners in Burkina Faso with food and help to work, he says: "We have been scattered. Some are in Ouagadougou. Wherever they have relatives who can receive them, Christians just go there. That's how people were scattered. No one has returned home.

"I have pain in my heart because of the things that happened. When something startles me just a little, it feels like my heart will stop. When I sit and think about my church which had more than hundred members, and how it just ended one day, with many crying asking me not to leave, and others begging me to go so as not to die, it causes pain."



Pastor Pengdwende used to care for a congregation in Bobo-Dioulasso in southwestern Burkina Faso

India - the destructive lies of Hindu nationalism



With a population of 1.3 billion people, India is on track to overtake China to become the most populous nation in the world. India also lays claim to being the world's largest democracy. Article 25 of the Indian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion – explicitly stating that all persons in India 'have the right to freely profess, practice and propagate religion'. However, for many religious minorities this commitment is paper-thin.

Since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister in 2014 a form of Hindu nationalism, which equates being Indian with being Hindu, has been popularised. Promoted in the media and enforced by the authorities, this ideology has resulted in Christians, Muslims and other religious minorities being increasingly excluded, and in certain parts of India violently persecuted.

Sabita (name changed to protect identity), an Open Doors local partner in India, explains the situation for Christians:

"Christian church services are being stopped, pastors, leaders and other believers are being beaten, women are assaulted and even children are being bullied and persecuted. No Christian is allowed to share about his or her faith to another person.

"This is the situation in India. Not everywhere, but in most places, especially the rural areas. Then we also have anti-conversion laws in certain states and now the central government wants to make them nationwide. An anti-conversion law means that if you share your faith you can be punished, you can be imprisoned. It's illegal to share about your faith. But not for Hindus."

On 29 November 2021, the Hindu nationalist Bajrang Dal group barged into a prayer meeting in Belur, in Karnataka's Hassan district. They accused those present of forcibly converting Hindus. Earlier in the month, members of a right-wing Hindu group, Sri Ram Sene, disrupted a prayer meeting in a hall in Maratha Colony in Belagavi and locked in the Christians until the police set them free. The attackers accused the pastor of luring poor Hindus into the Christian faith.

"An atmosphere of deep trauma, fear and anxiety pervades the Christian communities... the circumstances in which we found our research subjects living was one of imminent and existential threat."

In July 2021 Open Doors published a report by researchers from the London School of Economics. It was entitled: *Destructive Lies: disinformation, speech that incites violence and discrimination against religious minorities in India*. The research examined everyday life and found that:

"...an atmosphere of deep trauma, fear and anxiety pervades the Christian communities that we visited in rural areas, as well as many of the Christian and Muslim communities in medium-sized towns and villages and on the outskirts of larger cities. These fears and anxieties are based on thoroughly evidenced experiences of exclusion, discrimination, harassment, bullying, intimidation, violence and injustice. It would not be too far-fetched to say that the circumstances in which we found our research subjects living was one of imminent existential threat."

Through detailed ethnographic data collection, trauma-informed interviewing, and statistical and visual analysis, the report documents multiple examples of exclusion, harassment, discrimination and violence.



Kirti's husband was murdered by Maoist extremists for his faith. Denied food and medical aid during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Open Doors partners helped to meet her needs

With a particular focus on the states of Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha, the research showed how social media is being used to incite and direct violence against religious minorities via vigilante lynch mobs, with the violence and harassment often accompanied by state and media complicity.

The violence was orchestrated by Hindutva organisations, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Akhil Bharatiya Vidhyarthi Parishad (ABVP). The authorities also played a role in the persecution, in the refusal of services and legal redress to Christian and Muslim families; refusal to give some Christians the government services to which they were entitled by law; the threat to suspend such services if they were to convert officially; refusal by police and local legal infrastructures to acknowledge crimes committed against Christians and Muslims by Hindu attackers; misuse of anti-conversion laws against those legitimately practising their faith; and the pressure placed on Christians from Dalit/Adivasi groups to reconvert to Hinduism if they wished to secure jobs or be part of everyday life in their communities, rather than being shunned. The report contains eight case studies (six Christian and two Muslim).

Social media is being used to incite and direct violence against religious minorities via vigilante lynch mobs, with the violence and harassment often accompanied by state and media complicity

In Garhwa, Jharkhand, the report recounts the traumatic grief, harassment and struggle of Adivasi Christian widow 'Meera'. Her Oraon Christian husband 'Ravi', a local labourer, was entrapped by a Hindutva mob on the pretext of buying an ox. He was beaten viciously, taunted and then left to die by the police at two different locations. Eventually, after being denied medical care, he died in a police station.

Examples of persecution and discrimination documented in the case studies include:

- Intimidation and death threats
- False allegations, as well as speech, reports and images which incite violence, including derogatory and dehumanising comments made by police, law enforcement officials and politicians
- Disinformation about Christians and Muslims, their practices, their culture and their loyalty to the Indian nation circulated widely on social media by Hindutva groups, and disinformation via political speeches by Hindu politicians at all levels of local, national and state government
- Fearmongering, stereotyping, dehumanisation, discrimination and incitement to violence, propaganda and misinformation against Christian and Muslim communities pertaining to aspects of civic life
- Physical attacks by violent Hindutva mobs, with the collusion of local law enforcement officials
- Repeated attacks on the those who actively resist the violence – such as human rights workers and religious activists
- Unfair arrest and legal cases against Christians and Muslims who report ongoing violence or harassment against them
- A refusal by police and law enforcement to arrest or deter mobs from physically

intimidating people and damaging property

- Legal threats against victims and survivors of Hindu mob attacks, a refusal to accept compelling evidence of incitement, violence and aggression
- Intimidation of Hindu friends, neighbours and legal representatives who take up cases on behalf of, or attempt to testify on behalf of, Muslim and Christian victims
- Arson against places of worship for Christians; arson against their possessions – such as books and religious texts
- Deliberate and targeted sexual harassment of girls and women members of these communities, with the aim of humiliation and defilement
- Collusion of local municipal officials in the demolition of homes, and collusion of landlords in ousting Christian or Muslim tenants who have been falsely accused of crimes.

These, and many other examples of bullying, harassment, violence and perversion of justice, have ushered in a climate of fear and anxiety for Christians in parts of India. The persecution is especially grievous when one considers the extreme poverty in which many of the victims live. Open Doors continues to call for an international commission of inquiry to investigate the persecution being perpetrated on religious minorities in India.



Propaganda footage of Hindutva mob destroying a Christian family home

THE SUFFOCATING STRUGGLE

DAILY LIFE FOR PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS

CLAN OPPRESSION



MEXICO
Adolfina's church and land were destroyed by her indigenous community because she's a Christian. Her husband was imprisoned and she was left with nothing

ETHNIC-RELIGIOUS HOSTILITY



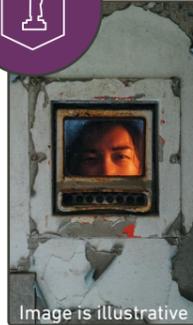
EGYPT
Souad, a Coptic Christian woman in her 70s, was dragged out of her home by local Muslim men. They stripped her, beat her and mocked her for her faith in the street. The authorities did nothing

ISLAMIC EXTREMISM



IRAN
Mary (22) is a Christian convert and activist who has spent six months in prison for being part of a house church. She has also been kicked out of university and lost her job as a teacher

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA



NORTH KOREA
"My name is Prisoner 42. Your name is the first thing they take. Then your freedom, your health, the presence of other people. They take your clothes, and your hair. And finally, they take away the daylight" The story of a Christian imprisoned in North Korea

CLAN OPPRESSION



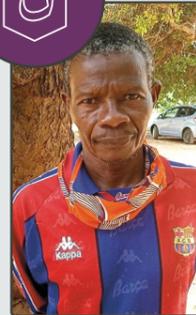
NEPAL
"In my village they do not allow me to fetch water from the village well, and we are not allowed to even touch the handle of the water pump. Often I went secretly at night to fetch water." Buhmika

ORGANISED CRIME AND CORRUPTION



COLOMBIA
Pastor Alberto's church supported youth, so they could avoid a life of crime and drugs. Because of this, criminal gangs violently threatened Pastor Alberto and his family. When they fled in fear, the gangs followed them

ISLAMIC EXTREMISM



MOZAMBIQUE
"On our way here, there was just suffering. Oh, I can't even express it." said Gilberto, who fled with his family from extremists in his village. But the violence had not ended. "From nowhere, the attackers arrived and set fire to my house. I got trapped. My life was in danger."

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM



MYANMAR
Early one morning the local village and Buddhist monks surrounded Samson's home. They stoned him and his family for their conversion to Christianity. Against all odds, they survived



PERSECUTION DRIVERS

Persecution and discrimination is often fuelled by a range of factors. These real-life stories of Christians experiencing a suffocating struggle because of their faith can involve multiple drivers

*Names changed for security reasons

China - autocracy, technology and digital persecution



The facts are undeniable and the trajectory is clear. A new era of persecution is unfolding in China – a country which re-entered the World Watch List top 20 last year, rising from No.43 in 2018, and which now ranks as the 17th worst offender in the world for the persecution of Christians.

China has a long and appalling record of human rights abuses. With around 1.8 million Uyghurs and 500,000 rural Tibetans being held in education/concentration camps, the UK Parliament has accused the Chinese authorities of genocide against ethnic minorities.

As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) celebrated 100 years of rule in July 2021, it sought to showcase to the world its power and imperial pretensions. At home, however, it is China's religious minorities that are portrayed as a primary threat to President Xi Jinping's vision for harmony, prosperity and military superiority. Such is the prevailing view towards Christianity.

Christians, conservatively estimated at 100 million in China and growing, now outnumber Communist Party members. This is perhaps why, during celebrations of the CCP's national day in October 2021, Christian pastors were ordered to 'behave', 'be quiet' and 'be invisible in the public domain'. The CCP has responded to the perceived threat that its growing Christian minority 'endangers national security' by implementing a Sinicisation policy towards churches across China. The aim is to bring them into line and under the control of the Communist Party.

Churches have been raided, closed, leaders arrested, Christian materials and property confiscated, and crosses removed from buildings. Against this backdrop, young people have been banned from entering churches since 2018. And in 2020, China brought in laws to enable the state to govern the selection of church leaders.

In May 2021, the CCP established new rules which require religious leaders to 'love the motherland [and] support the leadership of the Communist Party and socialist system'. Churches in Shandong Province (and increasingly elsewhere) have been

forced to display government posters with Bible verses to illustrate the 12 socialist principles. In this sense, China is seeking to subvert Christianity as well as to suppress it.

As with the regulations on religious clergy and religious institutions, there are now strict restrictions on the internet, social media and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In earlier reporting periods larger churches which were active in politics or invited foreign guests were monitored and closed. Now, under new rules to limit the extent of citizens' contact with foreigners, this can happen to any church, independent or state-sanctioned. Yet, rather than publicly closing church buildings, the authorities are more likely to simply withhold permission to re-open them after the lifting of restrictions due to the pandemic.

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For non-traditional churches (Evangelical, Pentecostal, etc) which encompass most Christians in China, after a period of being able to meet openly in commercial buildings, most have now returned to a house church model, or moved their services online.

Despite state firewalls and censorship, the internet has helped Christians in China to connect with each other. More recently through, the online church has seen instances where meetings via Zoom etc. have been stopped. As a consequence, many house churches have now split up into small gatherings in



Surveillance cameras on a street in Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region, China. This is a daily reality for Christians in China who are constantly monitored by the State | © REUTERS/Martin Pollard

which believers plan their meetings out of view of cameras and out of earshot of listening devices – and to which they avoid carrying their mobile phones.

It has now become compulsory to instal facial-recognition technology in state-sanctioned churches

In China, digital persecution, involving surveillance, censorship and disinformation, is directly linked to the Social Credit System whereby data (including DNA information) enables the authorities to monitor all aspects of life, judge citizens' behaviour and trustworthiness – and reward or punish them accordingly. This effects employment prospects, access to education, quality of healthcare, housing provision, tax breaks, consumer credit rating, and movement within and across the regions.

The vast video surveillance needed for this radically invasive system of data-driven governance is becoming nationally integrated. It has now become compulsory to instal facial-recognition technology in state-sanctioned churches. Recently, the CCP introduced an app allowing good citizens to report anyone with 'mistaken opinions' online. This Orwellian society, in which the government

warns citizens against religious groups and incentivises them to report illegal religious activities, increasingly relegates Christians to the status of second-class citizens.

Finding resources for Christian fellowship and discipleship is also becoming harder. Bible sales have long been restricted in China. In August 2021 a court in Xi'an sentenced booksellers Chang Yuchun, 53, and his wife, Li Chenhui, 44 to seven years in prison. Their crime of selling Bibles was described as 'inciting subversion of State power'. Last year, as Open Doors commemorated 40 years since 'Operation Pearl' in which one million Bibles were smuggled into China in a single night, Bible apps were banned from online stores and Christian chat rooms closed down.

Open Doors sees the expansion of digital persecution technology as a significant strategic challenge to Freedom of Religion or Belief. Open Doors is committed to raising the profile of this rapidly expanding new frontier for persecution. It is also calling for policy responses, international standards and ethical frameworks.

In March, Open Doors is holding an international academic conference in London. In partnership with the University of Birmingham and the University of Roehampton, the conference will explore the impact of digital technologies on Freedom of Religion or Belief.³



A Uyghur woman next to a canvas of Mao Zedong, Xinjiang | © IMB

³ Digital Persecution – analysing and mitigating the new threats to Freedom of Religion or Belief, 25 March, London

Countries of concern

SAUDI ARABIA (11)

The rise of Saudi Arabia to No.11 on the World Watch List is explained by the availability of more information about migrant converts and the pressure they experience. Most Christians in Saudi Arabia are expatriates from countries in Asia and Africa. Besides being exploited and poorly paid, Asian and African workers are regularly exposed to verbal and physical abuse because of their ethnicity and low status, as well as their faith. They are severely restricted in sharing their Christian faith with Muslims and in gathering for worship, which entails the risk of detention and deportation. This means that, whether Saudi or otherwise, most Christians stay silent and worship in secret. Converts often learn about Christianity through TV programmes or the internet, although this is strictly regulated by the authorities. Even so, the small number of Saudi Christians has been slowly increasing.



Riyadh viewed from the Al Faisaliyah Tower, Saudi Arabia

MOZAMBIQUE (41)

In Mozambique, which has risen from No.45 to No.41, there has been a sharp rise in violence, especially in the gas-rich northern province of Cabo Delgado. There have been recurrent attacks against Christians by militants believed to have strong ties to al-Shabaab in Somalia and the Islamic State (ISIS). The Islamist group al-Sunnah wa Jama'ah (ASWJ), which wants to establish an Islamic caliphate in Mozambique, has called for the removal of Christian symbols and has attacked houses belonging to Christians. These groups are supported financially by working with drug cartels, and through corruption involving some officials in the country. They have burned down churches and schools, and tens of thousands of people have fled. Despite military responses from the Mozambican, Rwandan and Southern African Development Community (SADC) forces the influence of the militants continues to



Displaced Christians receive aid in Mozambique - a country in which over half of the population live in extreme poverty.

grow. Christian women and girls are often targeted in the attacks. Since 2018, the militants have kidnapped and enslaved more than 600 women and girls in Mozambique's northern province. On 14 July 2021 members of an Islamist militia attacked civilians in the village of Mekombe, near Palma (Cabo Delgado), and killed four Christians. Christians have been beheaded, even children. For example, an 11-year-old Christian was beheaded in March 2021. The military have reported that on 15 December 2021, a resident of Nova Zambézia village went to the district police command, carrying a bag that contained a human head belonging to her husband. The suspected Islamic State-linked insurgents intercepted the pastor in a field, decapitated him and then handed over his head to his wife and ordered her to inform the authorities.

ALGERIA (22)

Algeria's rise up the World Watch List rankings to No.22 reflects how the situation for Christians is deteriorating following a wave of persecution. For the past four years, the authorities in Algeria have been involved in a systematic campaign against Christians and churches, closing and sealing 16 Protestant churches, and ordering several others to close. Several Christians, including church leaders, have been prosecuted on different charges including blasphemy and proselytising.

MYANMAR (12)

Myanmar has long been a place of extreme persecution for Christians. In recent years, democratic reforms and economic stability brought some hope for a better future. However, following the

military coup in 2021 the country rose to No.12 on the World Watch List.

In the fighting between government forces and resistance groups, many Christians in Chin state have been forced to uproot and head for cover in the jungle. In December 2021, it was reported that at least 49 buildings including a church had been set ablaze in the deserted town of Thantlang in Myanmar's western Chin state due to shelling by the military.

Thantlang Centenary Baptist Church — where the pastor Cung Biak Hum served as a minister, before he was allegedly killed by the Burmese military — was burned to cinders in September, according to the Chin Human Rights Organisation. Open Doors local partner Lwin says: "There is a shoot to kill order, so there is a climate of fear and anxiety. Believers have become internally displaced and are in truly awful conditions."



Protests in Myanmar

CUBA (37)

Ranking at No.61 on the World Watch List in 2020, Cuba rose dramatically to No.37 this year. Since the demonstrations against Communist Party rule in July 2021, state repression has increased against dissident voices such as Christian leaders and human-rights activists. Church leaders or Christian activists who criticise the regime are regarded as counter-revolutionaries. They face arrest, prison sentences, and/or harassment by the government and its sympathisers, who also act as local vigilantes.

The authorities also frequently deny the registration of new churches, which forces Christians to act illegally. Penalties include the complete denial of licenses, imposition of fines, confiscation, demolition, or closure of churches, including house churches.

The government has also exploited the health crisis resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic to

impose greater control over society and the lives of individuals. With pastors such as Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo detained without trial and facing a ten-year prison sentence, Cuba has seen a stream of leaders escape or emigrate. Consequently, Open Doors works to help the church become more resilient to persecution, instead of increasing its dependence on foreign aid.



Police make arrests during protests in Havana, Cuba | © REUTERS/Alexandre Meneghini

COLOMBIA (30)

In Colombia (No.30) church leaders who denounce corruption and narcotics or promote human rights are being threatened, extorted and even murdered as a result of the increased territorial control and violence perpetrated by guerrillas and other criminal groups.

In indigenous communities, there is significant opposition towards Christian missionaries and converts, who face eviction, imprisonment, physical abuse and denial of basic rights.

Most significantly, as a result of radical secularism, there is increasing intolerance towards the expression of Christian views in the public sphere, especially about issues concerning life, family, marriage and religious liberty. Christians speaking in public about their beliefs are sometimes targeted for supposedly being discriminatory and using hate speech. With the mounting opposition to free speech and the right to conscientious objection, there is also growing pressure to remove from public office any officials who openly defend their Christian faith or express affinity towards a specific church. Christian participation in the political sphere has diminished as a result.

Stories of hope

Hope for freedom in Iran

In December 2021, the Supreme Court in Iran ordered the retrial of nine Christian converts serving five-year prison sentences, after ruling that the 'promotion of Christianity and the formation of a house church is not criminalised in law'.

This is welcome news for all Christian prisoners of conscience in Iran because it means that belonging to a house church no longer makes Christians 'enemies of the state'. Mansour Borji, an Open Doors partner and Article18's advocacy director, says the judgement has the potential to become a landmark ruling:

*"We welcome this ruling from the highest court in the land. It will give thousands of others across Iran hope that they may now be able to worship together in their homes without fear of imprisonment."*⁴



Hamed, an Iranian Christian convert has been sentenced to ten months in prison for 'propaganda against the Islamic Republic' | © Article 18

The Supreme Court's decision states explicitly that their involvement in house churches, and even the propagation of what is referred to as the 'Evangelical Zionist sect', should not be deemed as against national security.

While Iran's legal system does not allow for a court precedent to be set, the judgement could positively influence cases against Persian-speaking Christians. Sixty-five Christians are currently jailed or detained without trial in Iran for their involvement in house churches. In all cases, the charges amounted to 'actions against national security'.

The Supreme Court's ruling states that: "Merely preaching Christianity, and promoting the 'Evangelical Zionist sect', both of which apparently means propagating Christianity through family gatherings [house churches] is not a manifestation of gathering and collusion to disrupt the security of the country, whether internally or externally." The ruling further states: "The promotion of Christianity and the formation of a house church is not criminalised in law."

Although Open Doors and Article18 continue to ask for clarification from the Iranian authorities, Mansour said: "We further call for Persian-speaking Christians to be provided with a specific place of worship, as is their right under both Iran's constitution and the international covenants to which Iran is a signatory, without reservation."

Hope and help in the pandemic

For many impoverished Christian minorities, the Covid-19 pandemic presented oppressors with new opportunities to intensify persecution. During the lockdowns churches were closed. This meant offerings and financial contributions dried up. So churches were unable to care for staff or vulnerable believers. Their capacity to provide practical and spiritual support was also reduced. Travel restrictions meant pastors couldn't visit isolated believers. House churches couldn't meet. Violence and discrimination continued. In some places, Christians were even blamed for causing the

⁴ 'Iran's Supreme Court rules Christians did not act against national security', *Article 18 news*, 25 November 2021: <https://articleeighteen.com/news/9836/>

pandemic. Converts, put at risk for declaring their faith, could no longer depend on their community for help in the crisis.

But help was at hand. During this challenging time Open Doors was able to bring vital emergency aid to 30,000 of the most vulnerable families in sub-Saharan Africa – all of whom faced increased poverty and persecution because of the lockdowns.

Isaya fled his village when Islamist extremists invaded. His family were just about managing until Covid-19 hit. What does social distancing mean when you live in cramped conditions? How do you buy masks and soap when you can't even afford food? When Open Doors delivered three months' worth of food to Isaya, it was a lifeline. "We thank God! If we hadn't receive this, it would have been catastrophic."

Although the impact of the pandemic varied across Asia according to the specific needs of the Christian communities, the combination of poverty and persecution was a constant driver of need.

In the Gulf region, Christians have been turned away from healthcare provision. In Central Asia, they were overlooked for government help. In communist parts of Asia, groups of tribal Christians were denied state aid.

In Asia, Open Doors reached 283,000 individuals with food relief and other practical aid last year, 126,000 in India alone. This emergency aid saved lives. It restored hope and confidence, and strengthened believers. Usha, a middle-aged woman from India, called an Open Doors partner to say her entire Christian community was starving. Open Doors partners visited with food – and the gifts sparked hope in the local community. Mahesh, from Nepal said: "We had no income nor place to live in the pandemic. We prayed and kept our hope in God. As an answer, we received groceries and help to build a house. I am grateful to God – and to you for standing with us and sharing our burden."

In the Middle East and North Africa the pandemic added another layer to the struggle to survive in places like Iran, Iraq and Syria. Church communities are desperate to meet, but governments have cracked down hard on Christian activities and there have been a number of arrests. One Open Doors partner in Iraq says: "We hear of people meeting in

small groups in their homes and intensifying their prayers. These homes become like small churches."

With the lockdowns, many Christians have lost jobs in countries where few have savings, and state support is non-existent. Open Doors was able to provide essential aid to 200,000 vulnerable Christians, of whom 150,000 were in Syria – where the church often shared the aid with their non-Christian neighbours. This prompted a local pastor to observe: "Many non-believing family members of Christians changed their view towards the church during this pandemic. They were amazed to see how the church took care of the needy."

For many families impacted by the pandemic, the crisis is not over. Open Doors is committed to increasing emergency aid and to providing the long-term support that people need. This includes: micro-finance and economic empowerment – to help families recover from lost income; trauma healing – to overcome grief and ensure Christians are resilient in their faith; and family discipleship and care-givers' programmes – to strengthen the church, starting at home.



Rama (not his real name), a carpenter, had to shut down his shop during the Covid-19 lockdown. This left him with no income or food. Open Doors partners provided him with critical relief aid

The persecution of **Christian women**

Religious persecution is not gender-blind. Open Doors analysis shows that women and girls are particularly vulnerable because of their faith. Gender Specific Religious Persecution (GSRP) and discrimination occurs when religious vulnerability compounds existing gender vulnerability. This increases both the risk and impact of a violation of the right to religious freedom. Sadly, Covid-19 has exacerbated discrimination for Christian women.

Last year, Open Doors produced a report into GSRP entitled *'Hidden, Violent, Complex: The Double Vulnerability of Faith and Gender'*.⁵ It found that

where Christian men experience persecution that is typically focused, severe and visible, Christian women experience a form of persecution that is hidden, violent and complex. Due to the vulnerability of Christian women and the hiddenness of their persecution, millions of women and girls suffer in silence.

Without an awareness of gender-specific forms of religious persecution, these methods of undermining the Christian community are often overlooked, leading to ineffective solutions.

Peninah's story

Peninah was only 24 when her husband Paul was murdered by al-Shabaab in Kenya. The attackers lined up the men and demanded that they recite the Islamic creed. Paul was a Christian, so they shot him.

Peninah was deep in grief, and yet her in-laws refused to support her. She was left as a single mother to a two-year-old, with no means of getting income: "Life became hard. I struggled because I was alone; I became dependent with no one to help me. Even getting food was a challenge." In Kenya, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa, widows are at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Open Doors brought aid and relief to Peninah and her son, and provided a sewing machine and training to help her make a living.



Peninah's husband was murdered by al-Shabaab on account of his faith. Open Doors have helped Peninah with aid, relief and training.

⁵ *"Hidden, Violent, Complex: The Double Vulnerability of Faith and Gender"*, Open Doors UK (2021)

The report reveals that GSRP occurs at a higher rate in countries experiencing conflict. For Christian men, the risk of abduction, death and forced conscription into the military or militias escalates sharply. Women are more likely to be trafficked, groomed or forced to flee the country. They also face a greater risk of abduction. The rise in psychological violence mostly affects women and girls, who often live in fear of attacks or struggle to move on from the trauma of past physical and sexual assaults. Women also are primarily impacted by the rise in human trafficking, although bonded labour and trafficking continue to impact men and boys too.

Shame dynamics are key factors in making GSRP effective against both Christian men and women. Christian men report being shamed and denigrated when they are detained and physically beaten or discriminated against within the workplace.

Sexual violence and forced marriage are used

as tools of shame, coercion and control. This is primarily against Christian women and girls, because of the strong association between sexual purity and the honour of a family or community.

Individual attacks on men and women target both the family and the Christian community. They impact the areas that are most vulnerable to individuals – the role or value of men and women.

For example, because Christian men are often family leaders, financial providers and leaders in the church, they are often targeted in an attempt to inflict harm on the wider Christian family and community.

The current reporting period found that sexual violence, trafficking and forced marriage were used even more widely than the previous year – effectively weaponising women’s bodies to inflict harm on their minority Christian communities and limit the growth of the church.

Sarah’s story

Following her conversion to Christianity, Sarah (not her real name) was beaten, threatened, and thrown out of her father’s house in North Africa and onto the streets. “You deserve to be dead,” her father said before beating her again. Like many women who convert to Christianity, Sarah is vulnerable because of both her faith and her gender.

Sarah, who is 27, grew up in a strict family of fervent practicing Muslims. Her father is an imam. She learned about Christianity in her late teens, and considered this new religion for several years before embracing it for herself.

At first, she didn’t discuss her conversion, hiding her Bible under her bed. When her father discovered her Bible and her Christian faith, he screamed, “You’re an

apostate,” and beat her. He ordered her to grab her clothes and leave the house.

In an instant Sarah was left as a young woman with nowhere to go, in a country where women leave the family home only to marry.

After finding a temporary place of safety with a Christian family, Sarah hoped and prayed that her own family would miss her and have a change of heart about her new religion. The opposite happened. Her father began to spread disturbing stories about her leaving home, saying: “She escaped with a man and is following a dark path.”

In the weeks and months that followed, Sarah was harassed by family members, who continually accused her of being immoral and dishonouring them. In this male-dominated ‘shame and honour’ culture, this narrative is commonly used

against young women who convert to Christianity. Different tactics would be employed against a son.

One day, Sarah's family called with a proposal: "You need to get married to be able to meet us again. Then people won't gossip about you anymore and think you're immoral. The man you marry will cleanse you from all your sins."

Under the twin pressures of being denied access to her family and moral accusation, Sarah agreed to the proposal.

Eager to reconcile, she married a tolerant man she met through mutual friends. He appeared interested in Christianity and possibly converting. But Sarah now believes that was just a masquerade.

"After our marriage, he suddenly turned against me; he turned into someone else.

I experienced physical abuse, disrespect and mistrust. He didn't allow me to have a phone. He wouldn't let me go shopping on my own. I felt I had made a grave mistake."

One day the man ordered Sarah to leave the house, saying 'she was no longer of any more use' to him. After being refused refuge by her own family – who advised her to return to her husband – Sarah packed her things. She returned to the same Christian family that had welcomed her when she was first thrown out of her home.

Open Doors works to support women like Sarah. It provides trauma counselling, discipleship training, small groups for women, and help for women to develop leadership skills. Through local partners Open Doors also offers practical help, such as finding a safe place to live, paying rent, buying furniture, and providing food.



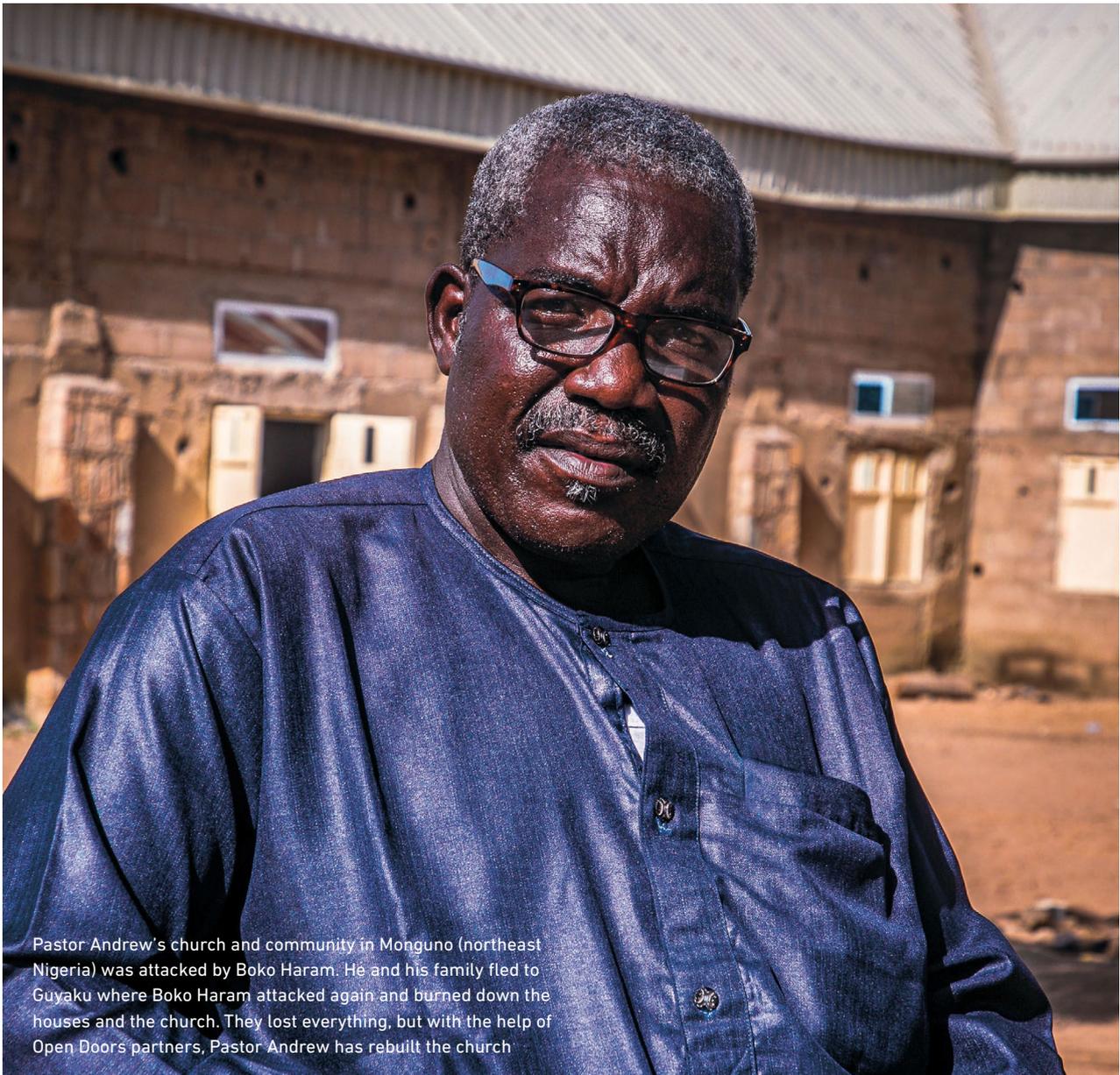
Sarah (not her real name), from North Africa, was thrown out of her home by her family when she became a Christian



The challenge to the **UK government**

It is evident from the findings of this report that the persecution of Christians is getting worse across the world. The Bishop of Truro's 2019 Review into the response to persecution by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office was most welcome. The implementation of the recommendations in the Truro report by the government will demonstrate the UK's commitment and determination to uphold the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief.

However, as can be seen from the trends highlighted here, persecution is taking new forms: from religious nationalism and rejection of human rights scrutiny, to deliberate destabilisation of entire regions by militants, to growing digital surveillance and disinformation against minorities. As Christians around the world face these developing threats, the government must also deepen its own engagement with FoRB. It must respond innovatively and proactively to these challenges to play its part in the global promotion of human rights.



Pastor Andrew's church and community in Monguno (northeast Nigeria) was attacked by Boko Haram. He and his family fled to Guyaku where Boko Haram attacked again and burned down the houses and the church. They lost everything, but with the help of Open Doors partners, Pastor Andrew has rebuilt the church

Recommendations

We urge the UK government to act on the findings of this research to:

- Promote and protect Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) as a leading priority in international/foreign policy and diplomatic engagement
- Use the UK's key role in international institutions to raise the persecution of religious minorities around the world with governments who neglect or oppress them, and to build coalitions to hold these governments accountable (for example, by promoting an international fact-finding commission on the rights of religious minorities in India)
- Increase its engagement with governments in West Africa and with Nigeria in particular as a matter of urgency, strengthening cooperation and other assistance, to ensure that the security situation and the fragile state of Christian groups in the region does not deteriorate further
- Ensure that the vulnerability of faith and gender for women of religious minorities is recognised clearly and publicly in the UK government's work on preventing sexual violence in conflict over the coming year
- Ensure that Afghan Christians are able to access the Afghan citizens' resettlement scheme, and that those operating the scheme recognise the particular danger faced by Christian converts in Afghanistan due to their faith.

As the Truro report is subject to independent review this year, we urge the UK government to build on the positive advances for FoRB through the review itself, and to prepare for future challenges to FoRB by:

- Making sure the Review leads to substantial, structural and visible change within the FCDO in its response to FoRB issues, particularly by taking steps to establish the role of the FoRB envoy in statute, and by giving this role substantive departmental resourcing

- Using the opportunities presented by trade negotiations in the coming years to promote human rights and FoRB around the world, for example by raising concerns around human rights during the development of new trade agreements
- Taking the lead on developing international standards and ethical frameworks around the export and use of new technology which may be used for surveillance, censorship or disinformation against religious minorities.

We urge Parliamentarians to take steps to support Christians facing persecution by:

- Using oral and written questions to encourage the government to maintain its commitment to FoRB, and ensuring that pledges arising from the Truro Review are turned into effective action
- Joining the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief
- Speaking out publicly and contributing to debates about Christian persecution wherever possible
- Accessing Open Doors briefing materials to keep informed about specific countries and persecution issues
- Participating in events ahead of the FoRB Ministerial (taking place in London in early July 2022), to champion FoRB issues around the world.

Open Doors **advocacy**

Open Doors UK and Ireland is part of a global NGO network that has supported and strengthened persecuted Christians in more than 60 countries for more than 65 years. Open Doors was established by a Dutch missionary called Andrew Van Der Bilj – otherwise known as ‘Brother Andrew’.

Initially focussed on supporting the church in the Soviet Union, today the work of smuggling Bibles, providing relief, training, livelihood skills and advocacy is global. Open Doors Advocacy operates in three main spheres:

- **Internationally:** at the United Nations in New York and Geneva, 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

The Open Doors UK Advocacy team is well known at Westminster. It is in regular contact with ministers and civil servants at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and plays an active role as a stakeholder of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief. Open Doors is also a stakeholder on the UK FoRB Forum.

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.

Open Doors has recently established an Advocacy Reps programme of volunteers who can represent

persecution concerns to MPs at a local constituency level. The media and public affairs component of the Advocacy team helps to raise the profile of what is happening to Christian minorities, and to engage the media in ways that affirm the value of religious freedom.

The annual World Watch List plays an important role in Open Doors advocacy, highlighting countries of special concern and key emerging trends. It not only gives an important snapshot for religious freedom across the world, but also provides a depth of research and analysis of the drivers of persecution and discrimination.

If you are a member of parliament, a civil servant, work for an NGO, or have a media enquiry 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 team by emailing: advocacy@opendoorsuk.org



In June 2021, Stephen Timms MP delivered the 2021 Open Doors *Destructive Lies* report conducted by the London School of Economics on Christian persecution in India to the Indian High Commission

Research 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 countries where it was most dangerous to live as a Christian in 2021. The reporting period for World Watch List 2022 was 1 October 2020 – 30 September 2021.

Information is gathered as far as possible down to grass-roots level. For each country being researched, violence data and detailed descriptions of pressure on Christians are supplied by: in-country networks; Open Doors country researchers; external experts; and World Watch List Research Unit (WWLRU) analysts.

The WWLRU 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 'squeeze' (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 'smash' element of persecution, one that often commands headlines but is thankfully rarely the dominant reality for Christians living in countries on the World Watch List. 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.

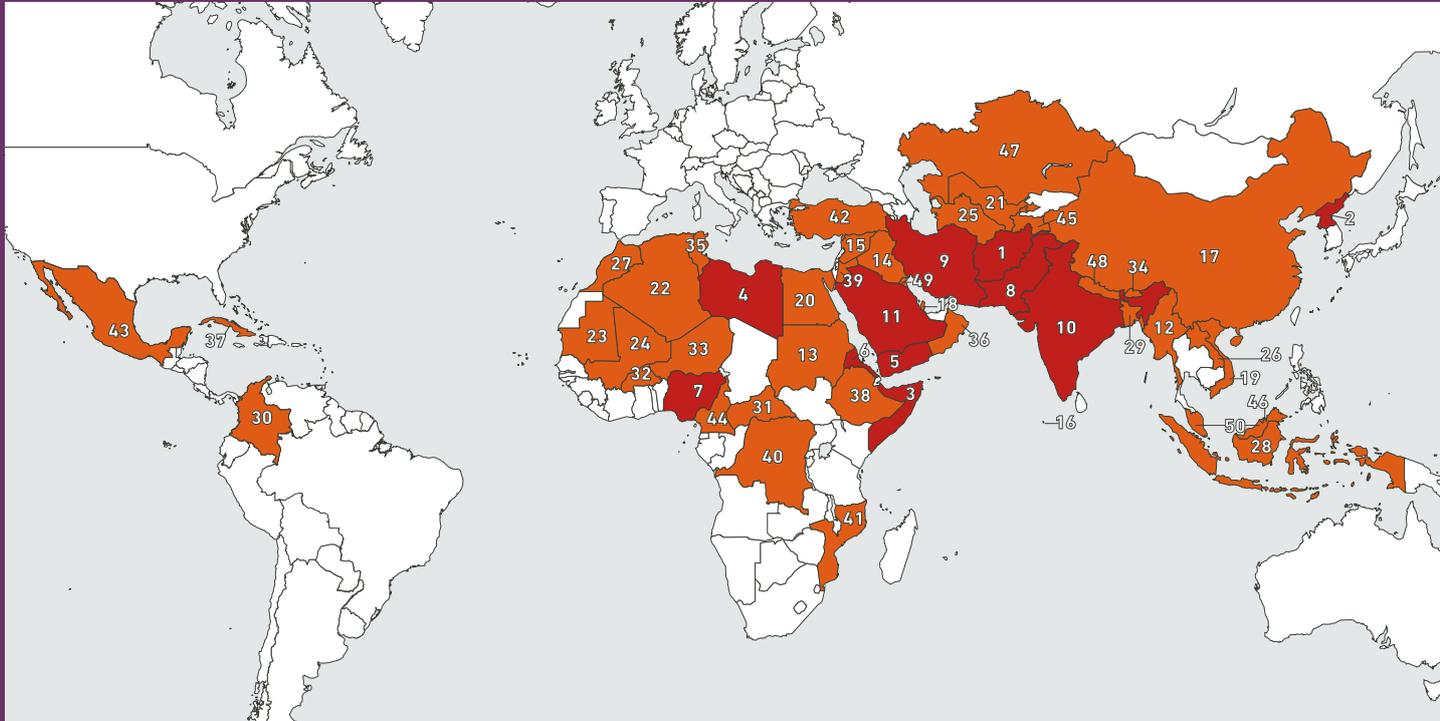
Following primary research, the survey data is analysed against secondary data. Researchers scour academic, NGO and news reports to ensure that

survey data is as rigorous and reliable as possible. Further to this, academics and 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.

The definition of persecution used in World Watch List analysis is, "Any hostility experienced as a result of one's identity as a Christian. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians." This broad definition includes, but is not limited to: restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalisation, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The 2022 Open Doors World Watch List Top 50



- | | | | | |
|----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--|----------------------|
| 1 AFGHANISTAN | 11 SAUDI ARABIA | 21 UZBEKISTAN | 31 CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC | 41 MOZAMBIQUE |
| 2 NORTH KOREA | 12 MYANMAR | 22 ALGERIA | 32 BURKINA FASO | 42 TURKEY |
| 3 SOMALIA | 13 SUDAN | 23 MAURITANIA | 33 NIGER | 43 MEXICO |
| 4 LIBYA | 14 IRAQ | 24 MALI | 34 BHUTAN | 44 CAMEROON |
| 5 YEMEN | 15 SYRIA | 25 TURKMENISTAN | 35 TUNISIA | 45 TAJIKISTAN |
| 6 ERITREA | 16 MALDIVES | 26 LAOS | 36 OMAN | 46 BRUNEI |
| 7 NIGERIA | 17 CHINA | 27 MOROCCO | 37 CUBA | 47 KAZAKHSTAN |
| 8 PAKISTAN | 18 QATAR | 28 INDONESIA | 38 ETHIOPIA | 48 NEPAL |
| 9 IRAN | 19 VIETNAM | 29 BANGLADESH | 39 JORDAN | 49 KUWAIT |
| 10 INDIA | 20 EGYPT | 30 COLOMBIA | 40 DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO | 50 MALAYSIA |

 EXTREME LEVELS OF PERSECUTION

 VERY HIGH LEVELS OF PERSECUTION



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