

 OpenDoors

**WORLD
WATCH
LIST** 2025

ADVOCACY REPORT



Cover image: Uchat Rifkatu survived an attack on her village in Nigeria in May 2023, in which her husband was killed. She and her family are now displaced.

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Executive Summary	4
RISING AUTHORITARIANISM	
North Korea: complete denial of rights	6
Central Asia: growing authoritarianism	8
Iran: a refusal to recognise converts	10
Unregistered: freedom of assembly and freedom of religion or belief	12
Undesirables: authoritarianism in Latin America	14
Under surveillance: digital persecution and AI	16
Insecure and doubly vulnerable: gender-specific religious persecution	18
DISPLACEMENT AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF	
Three stories from West Africa	20
Church on the run: displacement, religious belief and international human rights	22
Sub-Saharan Africa: a displacement crisis	25
Nowhere to go: violence and displacement in Myanmar	28
Yemen: displacement, violence and discrimination	30
Stories of resilience	32
FoRB and the UK's global human rights advocacy	34
Conclusion: a challenge to the UK government	35
Recommendations	36
Open Doors Advocacy	37
Research methodology	38
Q&A	39
The 2025 Open Doors World Watch List Top 50	40

INTRODUCTION

Recently in Central Asia, a church was raided by police. Officials forced their way into a home where a group of Christians were worshipping, arrested them and took them in for questioning. We don't know whether these Christians were being monitored, or someone had tipped off the authorities about the 'illegal' gathering. It seems ironic that Open Doors' global ministry was started by Brother Andrew smuggling Bibles into Communist countries behind the Iron Curtain in the 1950s, and this year we have seen ***rising authoritarianism, particularly in some ex-Soviet republics, once again threatening the church.***

Intensifying conflict and instability have also increased the pressure on Christians. In the midst of chaos, the vulnerable become even more vulnerable. Pastor Soré and his family fled their village in Burkina Faso when they had been attacked not just once but three times by Islamist extremists. They walked with 15 others (mainly children) for four days to find safety on a barren strip of land lent to them by a fellow pastor. They are living in makeshift shelters where - on top of everything else - Pastor Soré stays awake at night to ward off snakes. Sub-Saharan Africa has seen massive displacement as a result of conflict, instability and fragile states who are unable (or unwilling) to bring the perpetrators of violence to justice.

Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is set out in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Under Article 18, freedom of religion or belief is the right of every person to have, to adopt or change a religion or belief of their choice; to practise and manifest it individually and collectively; not to be discriminated against or suffer coercion on the basis of religion or belief; and to provide for the religious and moral education of one's children. When the multi-faith UK FoRB Forum held its first meeting, every faith group represented made the point that religious freedom is core to their belief system. And yet, as this report describes, in many parts of the world this freedom is not upheld, even in countries where it is written into the constitution.

Open Doors' mission is to strengthen the church in the places where Christians face the most severe persecution and we are passionate champions of religious freedom. ***This year's research has found that more than 380 million Christians around the world face high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith.*** The Bishop of Truro said in his report on UK support for persecuted Christians in 2019 that freedom for one faith group must mean freedom for all. If one in seven Christians are facing high levels of opposition how many other faith groups are also affected?

The World Watch List began as a way of identifying the places where Open Doors needed to focus its work. It was also designed to identify trends since we want to prepare people to know how to respond when persecution increases. Therefore, we record both the 'smash' and the 'squeeze' of persecution and discrimination because even seemingly low-level violations of religious freedom may pave the way to graver violations in the future.

We hope this research and report will awaken a new generation of MPs to the plight of Christians and other religious groups around the world who do not share the freedoms that we enjoy. We must talk about it and we must take action. Thank you for standing with us.



Henrietta Blyth
Open Doors UK & Ireland CEO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research for the 2025 World Watch List shows that more than 380 million Christians around the world face high levels of persecution or discrimination because of their faith. This represents a rise of around 15 million in a single year.

Digital persecution is emerging as a mechanism of control for authoritarian states as the digital space becomes increasingly weaponised. China is using and exporting AI-powered surveillance systems to track, monitor and repress religious minorities, and has mandated the use of facial-recognition cameras in state-registered churches.

The Sahel region of Africa has become a hotspot for forced displacement, with Nigeria at the epicentre. Radical Islamist violence in Nigeria has been a factor in driving more than three million people from their homes, and the terror group Boko Haram has begun using drones to hunt down Christians who are fleeing for their lives.

This report urges the UK government to strengthen its focus on FoRB as a key priority and not to lose the leadership position the UK has achieved. We call on the UK to continue to speak up for Christians and others who are being denied their fundamental rights on account of their faith or belief.

THEMES

This report looks at two broad themes. The first is Christians facing a lack of legal recognition or protection due to their faith. The second is Christians who suffer persecution or discrimination in the context of displacement, often caused by violent conflict.

Far from being given equal protection as citizens, all too often Christians across the world are denied basic legal rights in societies hostile to their faith. This report explores:

- ***The complete denial of human rights faced by Christians in North Korea.*** Christians in the country risk being sent to prison camps, face surveillance and discrimination in all areas of life, and are in danger of being forcibly returned to the country if they try to escape to China.
- ***Growing authoritarianism in Central Asia.*** Several incidents of violence against Christians in countries in this region were reported in the past year, alongside excessive state surveillance and restrictions on Christian gatherings.
- ***Iran's continuing refusal to recognise Persian-speaking converts.*** The Iranian government spreads disinformation against Persian-speaking Christians with a Muslim background, who are often imprisoned for their faith. Converts are also increasingly subject to state surveillance.
- ***Restrictions on the right to peaceful assembly for Christians around the world.*** Our research records many attacks on Christians who meet for worship. In some cases, extremists or vigilantes disrupt these gatherings: in others, the state imposes registration requirements which prevent Christians from meeting together. The situation in Algeria is of particular concern in this regard.
- ***Attacks on the church in Latin America.*** Christians also face discrimination or hostility in some countries where they are the religious majority. In Latin American countries such as Nicaragua or Cuba, the authorities target churches and Christian leaders who criticise them.

- **The rapid rise of digital persecution.** New technology is allowing authoritarian governments (especially China) to restrict Christian communities through surveillance and censorship. This has only intensified due to the growth in artificial intelligence (AI). Elsewhere, extremists are using drones in their attacks or are policing what Christians may say on messaging apps. The implications for freedom of religion or belief are only now beginning to be discussed.

The report also sets out the challenges faced by Christians in contexts of displacement. Open Doors research shows that Christian refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) are additionally vulnerable to persecution, discrimination or hostility based on their faith. Christians may be deliberately displaced from their homes or communities as part of a wider strategy to eradicate Christianity, or for other faith-related reasons. In certain regions, **Christian refugees and IDPs are also at greater risk due to their displacement and may encounter discrimination or hostility at any stage of their displacement journey.** This report explores:

- **A displacement crisis in sub-Saharan Africa.** The Sahel region has become a hotspot for forced displacement driven by a combination of extremist violence, environmental crises and socio-political instability. Areas of particular concern include Nigeria and Burkina Faso, which have seen many cases of extremist violence against Christians, and Sudan, where the ongoing civil war has left Christian communities exposed. In these countries, and neighbouring nations (including Chad, which enters the top 50 this year), large numbers of people are displaced.
- **Challenges in aid distribution.** Open Doors research has found that displaced Christians can face discrimination in accessing humanitarian aid. In Nigeria's Borno State, for instance, Christian IDPs reported systemic exclusion from government-run aid programmes. Living conditions in camps and host communities are often poor. Overcrowding, inadequate sanitation and limited access to clean water and healthcare pose severe public health risks.
- **Displacement and violence in Myanmar.** In Myanmar, Christians have been attacked by both sides in the country's civil war and have been forced to flee their homes. Widespread violence has prompted large-scale displacement in an area where Christians are already vulnerable to persecution and discrimination.
- **Attacks on Christians from many sides in Yemen.** Christians are at risk of discrimination in aid distribution, as well as violence from extremists taking advantage of the country's civil war and humanitarian crisis. Christians and others can be forced to flee their homes, either temporarily or permanently, and may even be forced out of the country.



Pastor Soré and his wife, Teresa, (CENTRE) fled Islamic militant attacks on their village in Burkina Faso. They're now living as IDPs, with 17 others in their care

NORTH KOREA: complete denial of rights

Christians in North Korea risk being sent to prison camps, face surveillance and discrimination in all areas of life, and are in danger of being forcibly returned to the country if they try to escape to China.

Freedom of religion or belief, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression are non-existent in North Korea. Apart from state-sponsored churches in Pyongyang – claimed to be show churches for propaganda purposes – any manifestation of religious beliefs is prohibited. The ‘Anti-reactionary thought law’, enacted in 2020, included the Bible among banned books. This reveals that Christianity is still seen by the state as a grave danger.

North Korea has been at the top of the Open Doors World Watch List for all but one year since 2002. A 2014 UN Commission of Inquiry into North Korea painted a picture of a ‘totalitarian State’, that ‘seeks to dominate every aspect of its citizens’ lives and terrorises them from within’.¹ A 2024 report from CSW, marking ten years since this Commission of Inquiry, highlights ongoing and severe violations of human rights in the country.²

CHRISTIANITY IN NORTH KOREA

Due to the country’s isolation, it is difficult to give exact numbers of Christians, but Open Doors estimates that there are between 300,000 and 500,000 Christians in North Korea. It is almost impossible for these Christians to gather for worship. For those who dare to meet, utmost secrecy is essential for their survival.

PRISON CAMPS

If discovered by the North Korean government, Christians face deportation to a political prison camp, hard labour or execution. Sharing one’s faith or bringing religious literature into the country may lead to detention and forced

labour. Choi Chun-gil, Kim Jung-wook and Kim Kook-kie were detained as political prisoners in 2013. All three have been held incommunicado after receiving life sentences in 2015.³

The North Korean government continues to deny the existence of political prison camps despite the undeniable evidence collected by international bodies.

LEGAL DISCRIMINATION

Other severe violations of fundamental rights inflicted on Christians originate from the ‘Songbun’ system. Introduced in the early years of Kim il-Sung, the system categorises all North Korean citizens into one of three broad classes: the core, the wavering and the hostile. Christians are included within the hostile category. Even North Koreans who are descendants from Christian families, but do not hold that faith themselves, may suffer discrimination under this classification system.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

North Korean women and girls who escape to China are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking. Victims are usually trafficked from North Korea on false offers of employment, and later sold as brides or sex slaves into China or other south east Asian countries. Victims are trafficked to the border and then transported to safe houses, brothels or buyers. Sexual violence and rape are common during these journeys.⁴ Some of these trafficked women and girls encounter churches and missionaries and convert to Christianity – they may face severe persecution as a result if forcibly returned to North Korea.

¹ United Nations Human Rights, 2014, Council Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea

² United Nations Human Rights, 2014, Council Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea

³ CSW, 2024, Urgent appeal calling for the release and return of three South Korean missionaries

⁴ Hee-soon, Yoon, 2019, ‘Sex Slaves: The Prostitution, Cybersex & Forced Marriage of North Korean Women & Girls in China’. London: Korea Future Initiative.

FORCED RETURN

All those who risk fleeing the country, despite strict border controls, and who are forcibly repatriated are considered criminals and face harsh punishment. Greater cooperation between the North Korean intelligence agency and Chinese police has resulted in increasing numbers of defectors, usually women, being identified and forcibly repatriated. Facial recognition technology in China has also made this easier.

In his foreword to the 2024 report by CSW on the human rights situation in North Korea, Lord Alton notes: “The forced refoulement of North Korean refugees to North Korea by China, in direct contravention of the 1951 Refugee Convention,

has made China complicit in the crimes against humanity identified by the UN Commission of Inquiry. Forcibly returned refugees face some of the most inhumane treatment under the regime.”⁵

The Human Rights and Democracy Report 2022 from the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) said: “The UK co-sponsored resolutions on the human rights situation in the DPRK, adopted by the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council. The resolutions recalled the DPRK’s responsibility to protect its population from human rights violations, including gender-based violence, and urged the DPRK to cooperate fully with the UN Special Rapporteur by giving them unrestricted access to the country.”⁶

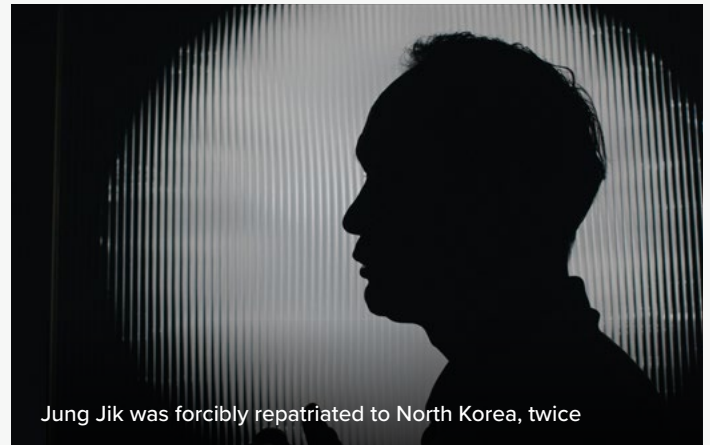
CASE STUDY: JUNG JIK

Jung Jik’s* father, his grandparents and his mother were all secret believers who never told him about their faith when he was growing up. In North Korea, children are urged to report their parents to the government. He says, “When I was young, it was not difficult for me to be North Korean. I thought Kim il-Sung was the only god.”

Jung Jik’s father was the first of his family to flee to another country. After escaping, he discovered that his grandfather was a famous Korean martyr who was murdered by North Korean soldiers during the Korean War. Jung Jik’s father became a Christian himself. After some time, he was arrested and deported to North Korea. Jung Jik writes: “The interrogators knew my father had become a Christian and tortured him.” His father died in prison. Jung Jik himself escaped from North Korea but was recaptured and subjected to harsh imprisonment. However, he says, “Of course, the inspectors beat me to get a confession, but I wasn’t tortured as harshly as my father because I wasn’t a Christian.”

Jung Jik then escaped from prison and managed to cross the border a second time. This time, he was taken care of by a church – and became a Christian. Later, he was once more recaptured, but then escaped North Korea for the third time.

Jung Jik writes: “I’ve now been in South Korea for some years, but my heart still yearns for North Korea... I believe the time is near before we will see big changes in North Korea. Yes, I realise that the situation only seems to grow more dim. I see that the situation is worsening, but we must remember that the night is darkest before sunrise.”



Jung Jik was forcibly repatriated to North Korea, twice

⁵ CSW, 2024, We cannot look away

⁶ Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2023 Human Rights and Democracy Report 2022

CENTRAL ASIA: Growing authoritarianism

Several incidents of violence against Christians in countries in this region were reported in the past year, alongside excessive state surveillance and restrictions on Christian gatherings.

The Central Asian church is under surveillance. Countries in this region were once part of the Soviet Union until its collapse in 1991. For nearly 70 years they were part of the Communist regime that adopted authoritarian policies towards citizens and severely restricted religious practices. Even today, however, those in power in most of these countries impose restrictions on religious activities, allegedly to maintain national security and social order.

Under the guise of national security, authorities have been known to impose restrictions on religious gatherings, the production and distribution of religious literature, evangelistic work and religious activity among children and young people. As the church in Central Asia continues to grow despite these measures, state authorities are becoming more wary of Christian activities. 2024 saw a wave of arrests and interrogations of Christians. The remains of the authoritarian state and its practices are still very evident today.

COUNTRY REPORTS

Kyrgyzstan re-entered the World Watch List this year, for the first time since 2013. No country among the top 50 had a greater increase in its metrics, adding more than seven points to its persecution score. Ranked 61st a year ago, the Central Asian country has risen 14 places to rank 47th on the 2025 World Watch List. This was, by far, the biggest move on the List, and the primary reason was a sharp uptick in violence against the church.

For example, the Baptist Union reported that on multiple occasions during the year, local residents hurled stones at the office of a Christian organisation in Karakul in an attempt to drive it off its property. In March, representatives of the State Commission on Religious Affairs, some armed, raided St Nicholas Catholic Church in Talas, forced departing worshippers back inside, and

held the congregation there until two nuns had signed a statement admitting to 'illegal missionary activities' and 'spreading their ideology'.

Such assaults helped to drive up Kyrgyzstan's historically low violence score. This happened against a backdrop of a presidency that has been concentrating power for several years. Amnesty International said in April 2024 that the authorities had 'intensified their campaign to stifle all forms of public criticism and peaceful dissent'.⁷ New laws enacted in March 2024 against alleged 'foreign representatives' have triggered state action against churches. Overly broad definitions of political activity are also being used to curb the right to freedom of association.

It was a similar story in neighbouring **Kazakhstan**, whose score rose three points for 2025. That was enough to propel the country up nine places in the rankings, to 38th. Again, this was due to a pronounced increase in violence against Christians. Since 2010, the Kazakh regime has taken a more authoritarian character, and a 2019 change in leadership brought no real improvement for Christians. Sparked by energy price rises in 2022, the bloodiest unrest since the country's post-Soviet independence broke out in multiple cities. The government is taking steps against further protests.

Open Doors received reports of police raids on four worship meetings of three unregistered Protestant communities in southern Kazakhstan. Sources also reported that at least 20 Christian women were sexually abused because of their religion, and at least as many were forcibly married to Muslim men. Such numbers are tiny in a country of 20 million people, but they are a noticeable departure from the immediate past.

Meanwhile, in **Tajikistan**, pressure on Christians rose in all spheres of life, and as in other cases,

⁷ Amnesty International, 2024, Kyrgyzstan 2023

violence also increased. The government continues to impose many restrictions on church activities. Elsewhere in the region,

Turkmenistan and **Uzbekistan** retain their places in the top 50 due to ongoing persecution, discrimination and hostility faced by Christians.



CASE STUDY: KHASAN

Khasan* is a house church leader in Central Asia.⁸ On Sundays, he worships with fellow believers at a private residence. This is the only way that many Christians can gather in this region. Recently the police, secret service and state religious committee officials (as well as local community officials) forced their way into the home where Khasan and others were worshipping and arrested them. Whether these Christians were being monitored or someone had tipped off the authorities about the ‘illegal’ gathering is unclear.

“They stopped our service,” Khasan remembers. “They divided all who were there and put us in different rooms so we couldn’t speak to each other. They searched the place while filming everything. They also took our phones and checked them. Then they called us one by one for interrogation.” Khasan was taken aback because there were no warnings or any warrant. But there was nothing he could do.

“When we asked them about the reason for their visit and for such a search, they said our meeting is illegal and forbidden because we have no official registration, and we have no right to hold a religious gathering in a private house. They started accusing us and interrogating everybody; it lasted four hours.”

In the weeks that followed, the gathered Christians were summoned to the police station and questioned again. In Central Asia, fear and intimidation are common methods used by the security services to try to break the will of their suspects. “It was a hard time for us,” Khasan says. “For two weeks, we were summoned every day, one by one or in small groups, to the state intelligence service. They threatened, frightened and insulted us. But I thank God because we were able to testify about our faith in Jesus Christ. They were also surprised when they tried to force several female believers to cooperate with them and betray the church, but they saw these women’s resolve to stand strong. We have nothing to hide, so we shared that we believe in Jesus Christ.”

⁸ We can't disclose his specific country, let alone his real name, to protect his safety.

IRAN: a refusal to recognise converts

Iran continues to refuse to recognise Persian-speaking converts. The Iranian government spreads misinformation against Persian-speaking Christians with a Muslim background, who are often imprisoned for their faith. Converts are also increasingly subject to state surveillance.

Iran remains at number nine on the 2025 World Watch List. The Iranian government sees Persian-speaking Iranian Christians as an attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the Islamic regime. They are often accused of being part of a 'Zionist cult', i.e. having ties with the state of Israel, which is particularly worrying given the increasing tensions between the two nations.⁹ Meanwhile, historical communities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are recognised by the state but are treated as second-class citizens.



Bazaar in Isfahan, Iran

In February 2024, a coalition of organisations, including Open Doors, CSW, Article18 and Middle East Concern, published a report entitled *Faceless Victims*.¹⁰ The report highlights the difficulty of getting information out of Iran, as many who are incarcerated because of their faith are simply not recorded. There is also a legitimate fear that

publicising their cases could worsen their situation. Those distributing Bibles in the country have been explicitly targeted, with 'over one-third of arrests targeting individuals in possession of multiple copies'. The report also highlights how those who leave prison may continue to be targeted by the authorities. In addition, other research has set out how Christians seeking to leave Iran have faced challenges in neighbouring countries.¹¹

Since protests erupted following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022,¹² state surveillance has increased, and the authorities are attempting to exert a firmer grip on the daily lives of all citizens. In October 2023, the death of Armita Geravand¹³ highlighted how AI surveillance can have dire consequences. Following protests against the Iranian regime, the Hijab and Chastity Bill was passed, which committed to the use of AI-assisted tools such as facial recognition to enforce the country's strict morality codes. Under this new legislation, systems have been created with personal identification databases being linked to facial recognition cameras.¹⁴ Sadly, the 2024 election of a new president of Iran has not been accompanied by any signs of improvement.

In November 2024, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution, supported by the UK, which expressed 'serious concern about ongoing severe limitations and increasing restrictions on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief' in Iran, and which named specific examples of these restrictions.¹⁵

In January 2025, Iran will undergo its Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations Human

⁹ USCIRF, 2024, *Misinformation and Disinformation: Implications for Freedom of Religion of Belief*

¹⁰ Article 18, 2024, *Faceless Victims: Rights Violations Against Christians in Iran*

¹¹ Article 18, 2023, *The Plight of Iranian Christians Claiming International Protection in Türkiye*

¹² BBC, 2024, Mahsa Amini: Iran responsible for 'physical violence' leading to death, UN says

¹³ BBC, 2023, Armita Geravand: Iranian girl who collapsed on Tehran metro dies

¹⁴ Council on Foreign Relations, 2023, *The AI Assault on Women: What Iran's Tech Enabled Morality Laws Indicate for Women's Rights Movements*

¹⁵ United Nations, 2024, *Promotion and protection of human rights: human rights situations and reports of special rapporteurs and representatives: Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*

Rights Council. It is vital that the rights of religious minorities in Iran are considered alongside the rights of other groups. The UK government should make recommendations through this process that the government of Iran:

- Recognise the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) of those for those of all faiths and none, as envisaged by Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

- End discriminatory laws or practices against the adherents of minority faiths.
- Invite the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB and the new Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran for a country visit.

CASE STUDY: FATEMEH

Fatemeh* still remembers the day the police raided her church. Some people were taken away. Others were made to sign documents saying they would never engage in Christian activity again.

Fatemeh lives in constant fear, of the police, the country's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and even her neighbours. Many of the people she knows have fled the country. "They were tearing us apart, one by one," she says. "Every time we heard the doorbell, we feared it was the police." She lives in isolation, scared that visiting her family will bring accusations of being a member of a house church. Her young daughter, Shirin*, who witnessed police brutality against Christians, begs her mother to take another route when they see police on the streets.

In 2021, Fatemeh's sister-in-law was arrested in a crackdown on Woman. Life. Freedom protestors. Shortly afterwards, Fatemeh's husband was also arrested. However, she is most worried about her daughter. She finds Shirin in tears whenever she or her husband are late home. Shirin wakes at night with dreams that the police are coming to get her. But Fatemeh is still doing what she can to serve her community. Support from Open Doors partners outside Iran has helped her to feel more secure and strengthened her faith.



Image used for illustrative purposes

UNREGISTERED: freedom of assembly and freedom of religion or belief

Christians face restrictions on the right to peaceful assembly. Our research records many attacks on Christians who meet for worship. In some cases, extremists or vigilantes disrupt these gatherings: in others, the state imposes registration requirements which prevent Christians from meeting together. The situation in Algeria is of particular concern.

While freedom of religion or belief (Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights¹⁶ – ICCPR) is a vitally important right for Christians facing persecution or discrimination, not all rights violations against Christians are violations of Article 18 alone. Indeed, the rights enshrined in international law often connect with each other, so the violation of one right leads to the violation of others. This is why religious freedom is often described as the ‘canary in the coalmine’: once your right to FoRB is violated, many other human rights will have been violated as well.

One example, noted by Open Doors for some years, is the connection between FoRB and the right to peaceful assembly. The right to peaceful assembly (Article 21 ICCPR) protects peaceful assemblies wherever they take place: outdoors, indoors and online, in public and private spaces, or a combination of the above. This fundamental right enables individuals to express themselves collectively in both public and private settings. States have a duty to ensure there is no unjustifiable interference with peaceful assemblies. States must also promote and facilitate an environment for the exercise of the right of peaceful assembly without discrimination while protecting participants against abuse by non-state actors or violence by other members of the public.

The right to freely manifest one’s religion can only fully be realised when other related and overlapping rights, notably freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, are also guaranteed and protected. Article 18 of the ICCPR protects the manifestation of one’s religion or belief ‘in community with others’, making the right to peaceful assembly a prerequisite to exercise the right to FoRB.

However, several countries have witnessed an escalation of violence and hostilities against Christians as they gather for worship or other activities. In the 2025 World Watch List reporting period (1 October 2023 to 30 September 2024), 7,679 churches or public Christian properties were attacked. For example, in India, vigilantes belonging to Hindutva extremist groups have physically assaulted worshippers in churches or house churches on several occasions. Common prayer meetings and religious ceremonies are disrupted under the premise of being a ‘forced conversion’ ceremony for non-Hindus, and church leaders are arbitrarily arrested and charged for engaging in alleged forced conversion activities.

The destruction of church buildings, disruption of church services by vigilante groups, and arrests and detention of church leaders are direct and visible violations. However, many governments have also implemented discriminatory laws and regulations that are less visible but have effectively shut down



Pastor Narendran* and Kavita*, India. They were both severely beaten and their church vandalised after a prayer meeting was interrupted by extremists

¹⁶ United Nations, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

churches or limit who can lawfully gather, restricting the size of religious gatherings. For example, some countries use registration requirements for religious groups as a pretext to limit their right to freely assemble and practise their religion or belief. But according to international law registration should only be required to provide legal existence and must not be a mandatory requirement to practise religion.

In addition, some states are using surveillance technology to police the attendance of religious gatherings online or offline. For more on this disturbing trend, see the section covering digital persecution from page 16.

ALGERIA

In Algeria, the number of Christians awaiting trial and sentencing is at an all-time high. Others keep a low profile to avoid prosecution under laws that regulate non-Muslim religious practice. The government attempted various forms of financial and organisational pressure to weaken churches, with a particular focus on online Christian activities. In addition, the authorities continue to systematically close Protestant churches.

These closures are based on Ordinance No. 06–03 which requires churches to register with the state. However, not a single application for registration has been approved. This ordinance, established on 1 March 2006, was intended to regulate the practice of non-Muslim religions, including Christianity. In reality, however, it has become a tool of persecution, leading to the sealing or closure of more than 40 Christian places of worship under threats and pressure from the authorities.

The Église Protestante d'Algérie (EPA), the umbrella organisation of Protestant churches in Algeria, has faced a high level of legal and government pressure after legislation governing religious associations came into force in 2012. This required re-registration of existing associations. The EPA obtained official recognition as a religious association in 1974. However, the provisions introduced in the 2012 law required that national associations have a presence and a minimum of 25 founding members from at least 12 different provinces.

Fulfilling these requirements, the EPA applied for re-registration in 2013. However, they did not receive a response from the Ministry of the Interior. This lack of legal status has been used as a pretext by the Algerian authorities to close EPA churches.

Members of the EPA National Council have been working tirelessly for several months to meet the requirements of the Algerian Ministry of the Interior. Without this compliance, no Protestant place of worship will be opened.

Many Christian leaders in Algeria have also been prosecuted for conducting worship. Initial convictions typically result in probation and fines, but repeated 'offences' may lead to imprisonment. Church leaders such as Pastor Youssef Ourahmane, Pastor Ahcene and others have been prosecuted and sentenced because of their faith, accused of practising or conducting non-Muslim religious worship without prior authorisation.

In September 2023, Pastor Ourahmane was convicted in absentia and sentenced to two years in prison, along with a fine of 100,000 DZD (approximately 725 US\$). He was accused of conducting an unauthorised religious assembly and worshipping in a building where religious activities are not permitted.

We urge the Algerian government to:

- Review registration practices in conformity with international law to uphold the right to manifest religion or belief as well as the right to establish and maintain religious, charitable or humanitarian institutions.
- Drop charges against pastors who have been prosecuted for conducting worship, and allow churches to re-open.

UNDESIRABLES: authoritarianism in Latin America

Christians face discrimination or hostility in some countries where they are the religious majority. In Latin American countries such as Nicaragua or Cuba, the authorities target churches and Christian leaders who criticise them.

NICARAGUA

Cases of discrimination and state hostility against Christians continued in Nicaragua during the 2025 World Watch List reporting period, with a rising number of public Christian properties closed and more Christians expelled from the country. This was driven by growing hostility against Christians refusing to show loyalty to the regime, who are subsequently labelled ‘terrorists’ or ‘enemies’ of the state. Repressive methods have become so systematic that they disrupt normal church activities and increasingly impose a culture of fear and self-censorship among Christians as they try to avoid becoming targets of the government.

The Nicaraguan government uses bureaucracy to control or shut down religious organisations. According to the World Report 2024 by Human Rights Watch,¹⁷ the government closed more than 3,500 non-governmental organisations in 2023 under the ‘foreign agents’ law, which targets organisations receiving foreign funding and engaging in political activities. This law has significantly impacted pastors and congregations who protested against government injustices in 2018. In response to these restrictions, many churches have started meeting in homes or other discreet locations to protect their members from surveillance and persecution.

CASE STUDY: ADRIANA

Adriana* and her husband are pastors for a congregation in a small town near Managua, Nicaragua's capital. In 2018, Nicaragua was shaken by widespread protests against social security reforms. Initially peaceful, these demonstrations soon escalated into violent clashes. Motivated by a sense of justice and faith, Adriana's sons joined the protests at different locations in the capital. During the summer of 2018, one of her sons attended a church service at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Managua, where participants were attacked by police and forced to shelter in the cathedral for five days. Her other son participated in a march in a different part of the city and had to hide in a house for two days following a police assault.

The family's trials did not end with the protests. Adriana's husband refused to participate in the 2021 voting process, believing the elections lacked transparency and fairness. His decision led to the denial of their church's legal status, constant surveillance by police and government agents, and difficulties in obtaining essential documents for their children's education. Their refusal to vote effectively rendered them ‘non-existent’ in some legal records, hampering their ability to secure necessary certifications.

This situation was similar to that of other Christian leaders in Nicaragua who faced massive opposition from the government because of their stance. “Many pastors are suffering; some cannot even sleep, filled with anxiety,” Adriana explains. “They do not know if tomorrow they will be the ones to lose what they have: their churches, their lands, even their bank accounts. For those of us already experiencing the closure of our organisations, we wait to see what will happen to us next.”

¹⁷ HRW, 2024, Nicaragua Events of 2023

Adriana's story offers a glimpse into the broader challenges faced by Christians in Nicaragua. Christian pastors who dissent from the government often keep a low profile to avoid reprisals. They live in constant fear of surveillance. "It is not easy, nor is it impossible," Adriana says. "However, I cannot deny that it is a great challenge to remain hopeful, to keep the fire burning."

Open Doors has played a crucial role in providing emotional, pastoral and discipleship support to approximately 9,400 people and offering legal and accounting tools to help churches comply with government regulations. This support has enabled the Christian community to persevere.

CUBA

Cuba's place on the World Watch List reflects systematic state repression against Christians. Christians are considered enemies of the regime, especially those affiliated with unregistered churches, which are under constant government surveillance. Churches stand as voices of hope and change amidst the widespread crisis resulting

from 65 years of Communist dictatorship. Because of their work in bringing assistance to the most vulnerable sectors of society, churches often face obstacles and reprisals, especially when church leaders are also outspoken critics of the living conditions faced by vulnerable people.

CASE STUDY: PASTOR MIGUEL

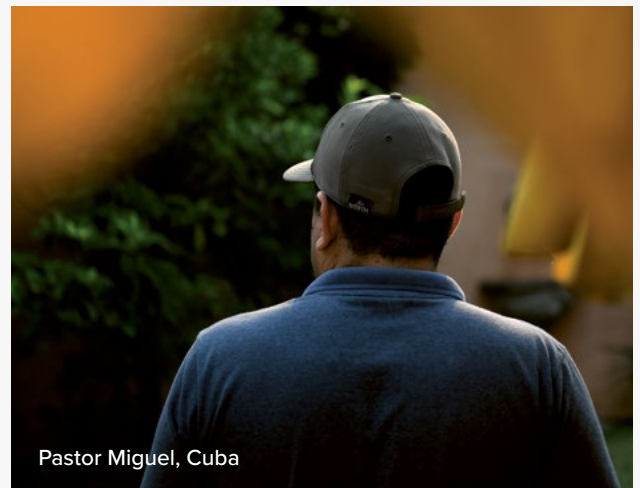
As he sits down to tell his story, Pastor Miguel* seems anxious. He sits at the dining room table, and it's clear he's on edge. "Talking about the situation in my country always makes me nervous," he explains. Miguel fled Cuba a few years ago with his wife and children.

According to Miguel, before the 1990s, Christians faced open persecution and marginalisation. In 1991, the social situation became more complicated. "While the government pretended there was no persecution by allowing some party members to visit churches, they were also [inserting] pro-government individuals into ministries to spy on our activities and destabilise the church," Miguel remembers.

This strategy continues today. A study by the Observatory of Social Rights revealed that 68 per cent of respondents know a believer who has been harassed, repressed, threatened or hindered due to their faith. "If companies learn that workers don't align with state ideology, they find ways to get rid of them."

Miguel recalls when a government spy infiltrated one of the churches where he served. The infiltrator monitored church growth and sought to take the church's building away after the congregation had made significant improvements. "They told us to give up the house where we worshipped, threatening to turn it into a community home or imprison me," Miguel says. "They even visited my children at school, telling them I was an enemy of the state."

After the 2021 anti-government protests, which saw more than 1,400 arrests, according to Human Rights Watch, the persecution intensified. "These protests were a turning point," Miguel says. "The government fears another uprising. They no longer hesitate to use violence, branding pastors as enemies to justify sending special forces, imprisoning them and demolishing churches."



Pastor Miguel, Cuba

UNDER SURVEILLANCE: digital persecution and AI

Digital persecution is rising rapidly. New technology is allowing authoritarian governments (especially China) to restrict Christian communities through surveillance and censorship. This has only intensified due to the growth in artificial intelligence (AI). Elsewhere, extremists are using drones in their attacks or are policing what Christians may say on messaging apps. The implications for freedom of religion or belief are only now beginning to be discussed.

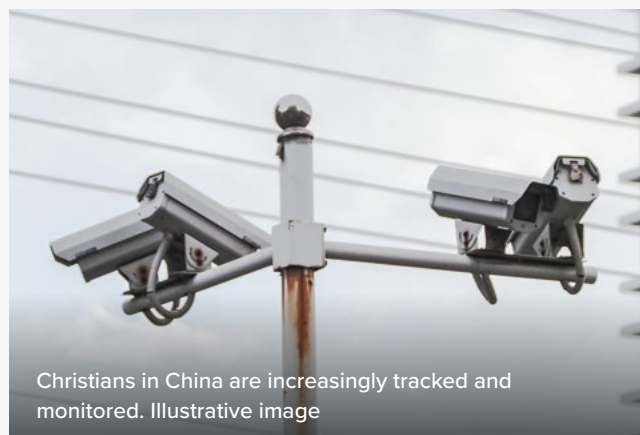
In the rapidly evolving technological landscape, artificial intelligence (AI) is emerging as a mechanism of control for authoritarian states. In the past few years, AI-powered systems have been exacerbating the persecution of Christian communities. Governments in countries such as China and Iran leverage AI-powered surveillance systems to track, monitor and suppress Christians and other 'undesirable' groups. Facial recognition technology, data analytics and biometric profiling are integrated into surveillance cameras and databases, enabling authorities to identify and harass individuals attending church services or engaging in religious activities.

There is a growing recognition of the risks posed to the rights of Christians and others by new technology. At the Freedom of Religion or Belief conference in Berlin in October 2024, Professor Stephen Schneck, chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), highlighted that AI was now being used as a tool to 'persecute people for their faith'. Professor Schneck stated that this trend is 'truly Orwellian' and fears it is 'the shape of the world to come'.¹⁸

In China, facial recognition allows the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to monitor those who attend religious ceremonies, and the integrated AI social scoring system allows them to track and monitor religious groups at a level that was simply not possible before. It has become compulsory for facial recognition cameras to be installed in state-approved churches. Churches that resist have been raided or shut down.¹⁹ As Open Doors reported previously, for several years China has been exporting these systems of control to other countries, including Iran (see

above), where systems are used to crack down on women, protesters and religious minorities.

In addition, less sophisticated technologies are being used extensively to spread misinformation and coordinate attacks. These technologies have been exploited by non-state actors to increase pressure on Christian communities. Social media has long been used to help spread propaganda by groups such as Daesh (also known as so-called Islamic State) and has been linked to atrocities carried out against the Rohingya in Myanmar.



Christians in China are increasingly tracked and monitored. Illustrative image

New technology is also changing how attacks against Christian communities are being carried out. Reports from Nigeria have shown the use of drones in attacks from Boko Haram to track where people are fleeing. The reports stated that Boko Haram attacked a Christian village with some members staying back to operate drones. When people began to run into scrub, these drones chased them down. As these technologies become cheaper and more available, this alarming trend may intensify.

¹⁸ Christian Post, 2024, China, Iran using AI to 'track and repress' Christians like never before, expert warns: 'Truly Orwellian'

¹⁹ USCIRF, 2019, *Religious Freedom in China's High-Tech Surveillance State*

CASES OF DIGITAL PERSECUTION

In 2022 Open Doors, together with the Universities of Birmingham and Roehampton, investigated the use of new and emerging technologies in the persecution of marginalised religious groups. The ensuing conference culminated in a report, with contributions from experts across the globe.²⁰

SURVEILLANCE

The CCP has established an integrated surveillance state using AI against the Uyghur population of Xinjiang. The people of Xinjiang are under constant surveillance. Their movements are tracked through their phones, and AI systems automatically profile people and mark them for arrest. Meanwhile, in North Korea, mobile phones regularly take photographs of people's faces to monitor their whereabouts.

China is the world's most advanced surveillance state. Unregistered churches are now considered illegal as authorities more regularly enforce regulations and tighten policies. And China is not alone. Christians in many autocratic states are having to be more alert to being watched, both online and in person. In China and elsewhere, World Watch List researchers detect a growing caution among Christians about expressing their faith openly.

CENSORSHIP

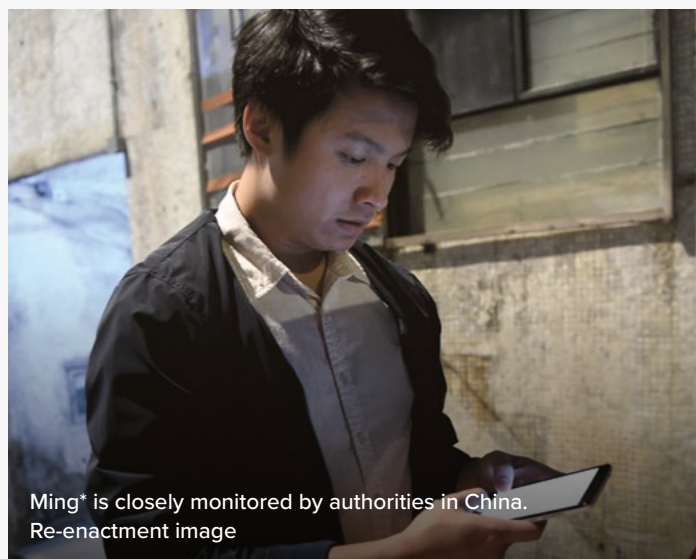
Online censorship often goes hand in hand with surveillance, as increased surveillance allows censorship to become more targeted, and indeed allows self-censorship to flourish. The 2022 Open Doors report on digital persecution²¹ noted that Chinese video-conferencing software was able to shut down meetings where religious language was used. Such automatic surveillance of language has also been deployed against Uyghur Muslims.

Censorship is not limited to Chinese companies in China. Under pressure from the authorities, both Google and Apple removed Bible apps from their stores in China. Many Central Asian countries are beginning to copy China's 'Great Firewall' model, with administrations having already banned websites and apps such as YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp and Viber.

It is true that new technology also offers opportunities to some marginalised religious communities. For example, some may be able to access Christian materials online, when this was not possible before due to offline censorship. Others may be able to contact other Christians via encrypted messaging tools. Nonetheless, in places where Christians are vulnerable to persecution or discrimination, there will often be a power imbalance that puts more tools in the hands of the oppressors than their victims.

The rise of digital persecution is a stark reminder of the dangers posed by new and emerging technologies and the potential risk to those in marginalised communities. The proliferation of incredibly advanced technology, and its availability to authoritarian states, is deeply worrying and requires a response from

all stakeholders: governments, international institutions and technology companies. The digital space, which once promised unbound freedom and connection, is being weaponised. It risks becoming a tool of the most extreme ideologies and of exacerbating the suffering of millions worldwide.



Ming* is closely monitored by authorities in China.
Re-enactment image

²⁰ Open Doors, 2022, *Digital Persecution: The New Frontier for Freedom of Religion or Belief*

²¹ *ibid*; page 6.

INSECURE AND DOUBLY VULNERABLE: gender-specific religious persecution

Persecution, discrimination and hostility based on faith or belief have distinct impacts on men and women. Open Doors research highlights how attacks on Christian women are often multifaceted, taking advantage of existing vulnerabilities to bring pressure to bear on their faith. This often includes discrimination in the legal sphere, in marriage or inheritance law, for example, as well as the threat of sexual violence and forced marriage.

In March 2024, Open Doors published a report on the connection between insecurity and state fragility, and the distinct forms of persecution experienced by Christian men and women. It found that certain specific forms of persecution predominated in such cases of insecurity. For example, in contexts where violence is high, faith-related forced marriage is the top pressure point for women in 84 per cent of the 50 countries on the World Watch List.

The role of insecurity in exacerbating existing forms of violence should not be overlooked. For example, the report notes the rise in intimate partner violence during conflict – citing a report which identified a rise in domestic violence in the context of the war in Yemen.²² The report also describes

how women who convert to Christianity are at particular risk of being targeted in such situations.

Marginalised Christians, especially women, can be particularly vulnerable in insecure contexts, such as those of conflict, forced displacement and criminal violence. Generally, it is those already vulnerable who become more at risk when violence escalates. Women belonging to religious minorities are often one such group.

In addition, violent insecurity leaves an indelible imprint on societies for decades. Even when violence formally ceases, men and women of marginalised religious communities still face challenges as a result. This can include the legacies of trauma, the challenges of forced displacement settings and continued marginalisation when societies restructure, all of which can be impacted by religion and gender.

The report recommends that a gender perspective is integrated into programmes designed for protecting and promoting FoRB, and that sensitivity to issues of FoRB is integrated into gender-related anti-discrimination programmes.



Christian women in war-torn Yemen are particularly vulnerable

²² Mwatana for Human Rights, 2022, *Fragile Walls: A study of domestic violence against women during the war in Yemen (2014 - 2021)*

A camp for the internally displaced in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. These camps (some formal but mostly informal) consist of Christians who have fled the Fulani militant violence in northern Nigeria.



THREE STORIES FROM WEST AFRICA

The 2025 World Watch List research highlights the growing violence against Christians in sub-Saharan Africa. What follows are three stories of Christians who have faced such violent attacks in West Africa, and who have in some cases been helped with trauma counselling by Open Doors partners. The violence which they suffer is one of the major factors driving the displacement of Christians in this region, and this report will go on to discuss the implications of such displacement for Christians both in West Africa and elsewhere. The African churches are urgently requesting others to stand with them against violent persecution and so Open Doors has launched the multi-year *Arise Africa campaign*, with the strapline: “Stop the violence, start the healing.”²³

PASTOR JOHN: BURKINA FASO

Burkina Faso used to be the epitome of religious cohesion, but Islamist militant influence has managed to erode much of the peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians. In 2023, Burkina Faso overtook Afghanistan on the Global Terrorism Index of the Institute for Economics and Peace. It remains as the country most impacted by terrorism in the 2024 Index.²⁴

“Even going out of the house was difficult.”

Pastor John* remembers when life was peaceful. After finishing Bible school, he went to the northern region of Bassé to serve a small congregation. Until just a few years ago, he went about his work without problems. Even as the influence of extremists grew and more men joined their ranks, Pastor John went about his life without fear.

However, as things grew more difficult, John began to consider whether he should leave the area. “Even going out of the house was difficult,” Pastor John says. “We couldn’t visit our faithful any more.” But he couldn’t get past his

responsibility to his congregation. Nonetheless, because other pastors in the area did leave, John suddenly found himself managing five churches.

He became an invisible pastor. He would hide himself, visit one church secretly, then hide again, until he had an opportunity to visit another. The extremists didn’t realise there was still an active pastor among the Christians. However, one day the extremists attacked his village, burning the church building and killing many members of John’s congregation, including his son.

After the discovery of his son’s body, Pastor John decided he had to go to Bobo, about 100 kilometres from Bassé. He had found his wife, Esther, who had been hiding in the bush with their other children. A friend who had heard about the shooting came with his car and brought John and his family to Bobo. Most of the surviving Christians walked the entire distance. “We arrived with naked hands,” John says. “We didn’t take any clothes, we had no food, no house nor anything else. We had nothing.”

Among those who came to visit John were local partners of Open Doors, who went to the area as soon as they could. “They really comforted us,” John says. “And they invited me to come to a training session. I’m so grateful for that. I would be in a really bad place without this training.”

ELISABETH: NIGER

Elisabeth was raised in a family of Christians, one of the religious minorities in Niger. She grew up in relative peace, but for years she was aware of the mounting tensions between Christians and Islamist extremists. “Earlier, we only heard about jihadist attacks elsewhere,” Elisabeth says, “but now they have reached us too.”

Elisabeth tells us that she lost her father, mother and two brothers to extremist attacks. Following these attacks, she and her husband and children fled the village in which she grew up.

²³ You can read more about the *Arise Africa* campaign here: www.opendoorsuk.org/act/arise-africa/, or on page 40 of this report.

²⁴ IEP, 2024, Global Terrorism Index 2024



Recently, she heard about another attack on her village. “We are looking to God, but someone called me two days ago and told me that the jihadists came to our village. People were running, and a pregnant woman fell on the ground. She was later rushed to the hospital. Others were beaten.”

“Earlier, we only heard about jihadist attacks elsewhere, but now they have reached us too.”

In addition to attacks, the insurgency has made life difficult in other ways. In the village where Elisabeth now lives, earning enough money to buy food has become very difficult. She used to gather firewood to sell at market but then the extremists made it impossible for Elisabeth and others to continue their businesses. “They blocked all the roads and didn’t allow people in or out,” she says. “We couldn’t sell things in the market anymore.” As a pastor’s wife, Elisabeth can’t risk being stopped at the illegal checkpoints.

Knowing what she has experienced and survived, our local partners invited Elisabeth to come to trauma care training where she began the healing process. Elisabeth continues to pray, asking God for much hoped-for peace. “We want to go back to our village and continue God’s work,” she says. “I also pray for the jihadists, that they will repent.”

SALAMATU: NIGERIA

In 2022, Salamatu’s village in Yobe State was attacked by Boko Haram, who killed nine of her

neighbours. Then in 2024, Boko Haram attacked the church, shooting the pastor and burning the building to the ground. As they rampaged through the village, Salamatu’s husband told her to hide upstairs with their children and grandchildren. As she ran upstairs, she heard a gunshot. They had killed her husband. Her son phoned the local military, but no one responded. At 4am, she left her house to find her husband’s body, and saw her son’s car in flames.

Six people were killed that night. Salamatu wanted to bury her husband’s body, but the previous time widows tried to bury their husbands, they were ambushed by extremists, so she drove to the next village to bury him instead.

Official aid is available to arable farmers in Nigeria, but not to Salamatu and her family. “Everyone received coupons to collect food,” Salamatu says. “But when they discovered we were Christians, we didn’t receive the coupon. There was a Muslim lady whose name appeared on the list three times. She received three coupons and gave one to me, so at least I could collect some food. When I do, I bring her some of the food I have received and then share the rest with my own family.”

Like many other Christians in sub-Saharan Africa, Salamatu was forced to flee her home. If she returns, she believes she will be killed. She has received trauma counselling from Open Doors partners, which she says has stopped the nightmares, but like so many others she is still unable to return home. She is just one of the millions displaced across the region.

CHURCH ON THE RUN: displacement, religious belief and international human rights

Millions of Christians have fled for their lives, losing their homes and networks for social or financial support and protection. Christian refugees and IDPs are at greater risk and may encounter discrimination or hostility at any stage of their displacement journey.

Land is not merely a resource: it is deeply tied to identity, culture and survival for countless communities around the world. For those living in countries on the World Watch List, land represents much more than physical space; it is the heart of cultural identity, economic sustenance and social cohesion. The loss of land, whether through conflict or religious persecution, can lead to entire communities being profoundly destabilised. It often marks the beginning of a longer, harrowing journey filled with loss and uncertainty.

DISPLACEMENT AND PERSECUTION

Not all displaced Christians are displaced because of their faith, though that is true for many. Displaced Christians – alongside others – may also suffer violations of their rights for reasons other than their faith. Whatever the initial cause of their displacement, Christian refugees and IDPs are at greater risk and may encounter discrimination or hostility because of their faith at any stage of their displacement journey – even in IDP or refugee camps. Our research seeks to document this particular double vulnerability.

The 2024 Open Doors report on Gender-Specific Religious Persecution notes: “Marginalised Christians, especially women, can be particularly vulnerable in insecure contexts, such as settings of conflict, forced displacement and criminal violence.” It adds: “It is those already vulnerable who become more at risk when violence escalates.”

BROADER IMPLICATIONS OF DISPLACEMENT

Displacement breaks individuals and families away from social and community networks, and a loss of community can be one of the greatest threats to the resilience of Christians and their sense of identity. They have lost not only their

homes but also their practical networks for social or financial support and protection. Rights violations do not end at borders. The global picture of rights violations against Christians can only be partial if just the static church is considered.

The implications of displacement and land confiscation are far-reaching, with both tangible and intangible consequences for affected communities. These impacts extend beyond the immediate loss of land and livelihood:

- **Economic devastation.** The confiscation of land and property strips families of their primary means of income and sustenance. Displaced individuals face significant challenges in securing new employment. This leads to cycles of poverty and vulnerability that can persist for generations.
- **Cultural erosion.** The destruction or abandonment of homes, churches and burial sites erodes a community’s cultural and spiritual identity. The loss of land and cultural sites makes it incredibly difficult, if not impossible, for displaced people to return and rebuild their lives, further fragmenting the community.
- **Psychological trauma.** The psychological toll of displacement is particularly acute for children, who are often the most vulnerable during forced migration. The upheaval of normal life takes a deep emotional and psychological toll on the displaced, further complicating efforts to rebuild their lives.

These abuses, along with their consequences, represent serious violations of international human rights laws. They violate fundamental rights such as the right to property, the right to freedom of movement, and the right to freedom of religion or belief.

LEGAL PROTECTIONS AND GAPS

International human rights law provides several frameworks aimed at addressing the issues of land rights and displacement:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) guarantees the right to own property, and protection from arbitrary displacement or dispossession. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of their property.
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) protects the rights of minorities to enjoy their culture, religion and language without discrimination, including their right to live in their homeland.
- Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement offer a set of guidelines to protect and assist displaced persons, though these principles lack binding enforcement mechanisms.
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) calls for the elimination of discrimination, including that based on race, ethnicity or religion, and advocates for equal access to land ownership and other resources.

Despite these frameworks, enforcement remains weak, particularly in countries where governments are either complicit in violations or where there are conflicts with non-state actors. The absence of robust legal mechanisms for accountability often leaves displaced communities without recourse to justice or protection.



Christians living in a displacement camp in Nigeria's Middle Belt



Pastor Barnabas and his family have lived in this IDP camp in Benue state, Nigeria, for five years

CASE STUDY: PASTOR BARNABAS

As Pastor Barnabas walks through the camp where he lives, he points out the makeshift tents in every direction. He is the pastor for those who live in these tents, in an IDP camp in Benue State, northern Nigeria. “Millions of Christians are displaced, here in Nigeria,” says Pastor Barnabas. “Millions of Christians are displaced in Africa. The news doesn’t care about it, politicians don’t talk about it, governments don’t talk about it, global politics don’t talk about it. Nobody talks about it.”

Pastor Barnabas stoops down to show us his tent, pulled together from whatever materials were available – mostly palm leaves and mosquito nets. This tiny space has been home to Pastor Barnabas, his wife, Joy, and their family for five years. At night, three of their children sleep with them, but there is no room for them all. The other children have to sleep with a neighbour.

Pastor Barnabas was displaced following an attack on his farm by Islamist extremists. “My brother was shot by the militants, and my brother’s wife was also shot and then macheted and killed by the militants,” he says. Years later, he continues to be affected by the injuries he himself sustained during this attack. And the pain of loss is still raw.

“In this camp, many people are affected, many are injured, many are killed, or their loved ones have been killed,” he says. “This affected not only my family, not only in the particular IDP camp I’m living in, but there are millions of Nigerians that are being displaced. And it is not only in Nigeria these things are happening. They are happening in the whole of Africa.

“Now, I have lost everything that I had. Everything in my home and village was burned. I cannot take care of my children. I cannot feed them. Most of the men go looking for work to do, in order to get daily food. But yet, it will not be enough for one meal.”

Every day, Pastor Barnabas sees the men in the camp weigh up terrible choices. “This hunger leads many of them to go in search of food to eat where they are being attacked by the militants. They have no option, they have to go back there again – and when they go, they are attacked again.”

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: a displacement crisis

The Sahel region has become a hotspot for forced displacement driven by a combination of extremist violence, environmental crises and socio-political instability. In recent years, displacement has reached unprecedented levels, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations, including Christian communities.

Open Doors research, including most recently the report *No Road Home*,²⁵ has found that displaced Christians can face discrimination in accessing humanitarian aid. In Nigeria's Borno State, for instance, Christian IDPs reported systemic exclusion from government-run aid programmes. Living conditions in camps and host communities are often poor too. Overcrowding, inadequate sanitation and limited access to clean water and healthcare pose severe public health risks.

BURKINA FASO (20)

Burkina Faso has experienced a dramatic increase in displacement due to escalating extremist violence. The country hosts more than two million IDPs, a figure that has surged in recent years as groups such as Ansar-ul Islam, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Al-Qaeda-linked Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) wage attacks across the northern and eastern regions.

Christian communities face significant threats, as extremist groups often target churches, faith leaders and Christian villages. Displaced Christians frequently report being forced to flee at short notice. Many IDPs live in overcrowded informal camps or with host families in urban centres such as Ouagadougou, where resources are stretched thin.

The deteriorating security situation has made humanitarian access increasingly difficult. This leaves displaced communities, including Christians, vulnerable to food shortages, poor sanitation and limited medical care.

MALI (14)

Mali's 400,000 IDPs have mostly fled violence in the north and centre of the country. Extremist groups such as ISGS and JNIM have used violence, including targeted attacks on Christians, to gain control over territories. Churches have been burned, priests kidnapped, and Christian communities expelled from their homes. For Christian IDPs, faith-based discrimination exacerbates their vulnerabilities, as they can be overlooked by local or even international aid programmes.

NIGER (28)

Niger faces overlapping crises of insecurity, displacement and environmental degradation. More than 300,000 are internally displaced, and the country also hosts more than 250,000 refugees from Nigeria, Mali and Burkina Faso. Extremist violence by groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP and Al-Qaeda affiliates has driven much of the displacement, particularly in the south-eastern Diffa region and areas near the Malian border.



A family stand with the few belongings they were able to carry when they fled, Niger

²⁵ Open Doors, 2024, *No Road Home: Christian IDPs displaced by extremist violence in Nigeria*

Religious minorities are often the target of extremist attacks, leading to widespread fear and insecurity. In Diffa and Tillabéri, Christian communities report attacks on churches, forced conversions and destruction of property.

CHAD (49)

For five straight years, Chad's total score has risen by at least two points every year, finally pushing it into the top 50 of the World Watch List in 2025, ranking 49th. The military rules by decree, civil society has little access to government, and in February 2024 security forces killed Chad's main opposition leader.

In the east, a humanitarian crisis is growing in camps full of refugees fleeing Sudan's civil war. Chad hosts over half a million refugees and more than 400,000 IDPs, placing immense pressure on its limited resources.

Islamist militant groups feed on the unstable conditions, leading to killings, abductions, forced displacements and generally heightened discrimination of Christians. They are denied access to community resources, receive unequal treatment in the workplace, and endure social ostracism, surveillance and intimidation.

In these steadily declining conditions, Christians are often regarded as allies to the 'other side' or as foreign agents. They are being displaced, and their properties destroyed and burned. The situation is especially difficult in regions outside the capital and largest city, N'Djamena, where Christians often resort to practising their faith in secret due to the influence of radical groups.

NIGERIA (7)

The violence in Nigeria is multi-dimensional, driven by Boko Haram and ISWAP in the north east, increased insecurity in the Middle Belt, and banditry in the north west.

In Borno State, Christian IDPs report systemic discrimination in official displacement camps, often being excluded from aid distribution and pressured to convert to Islam. Many live in informal camps run by churches, which lack adequate resources to meet the needs of the displaced. In Plateau State, militants frequently target Christian villages, leading to repeated cycles of displacement. A new Islamist extremist group, Lakurawa, has

emerged in the north west, armed with advanced weaponry and a radical Islamist agenda.

The scale of violence and displacement in Nigeria makes it a regional focal point for humanitarian interventions. However, gaps in aid distribution, combined with government inaction and insecurity, mean that displaced populations face prolonged suffering.

In 2023, the hope was that the new president Bola Ahmed Tinubu would steer security forces towards more effective intervention against the human rights violations being perpetrated against Christians. However, there is little evidence that this was successful during the reporting period for the 2025 World Watch List. On the evening of Easter Sunday in 2024, for example, villages in southern Kaduna state were attacked in an area heavy with military installations. Witnesses told the media they saw no government effort to protect the victims.

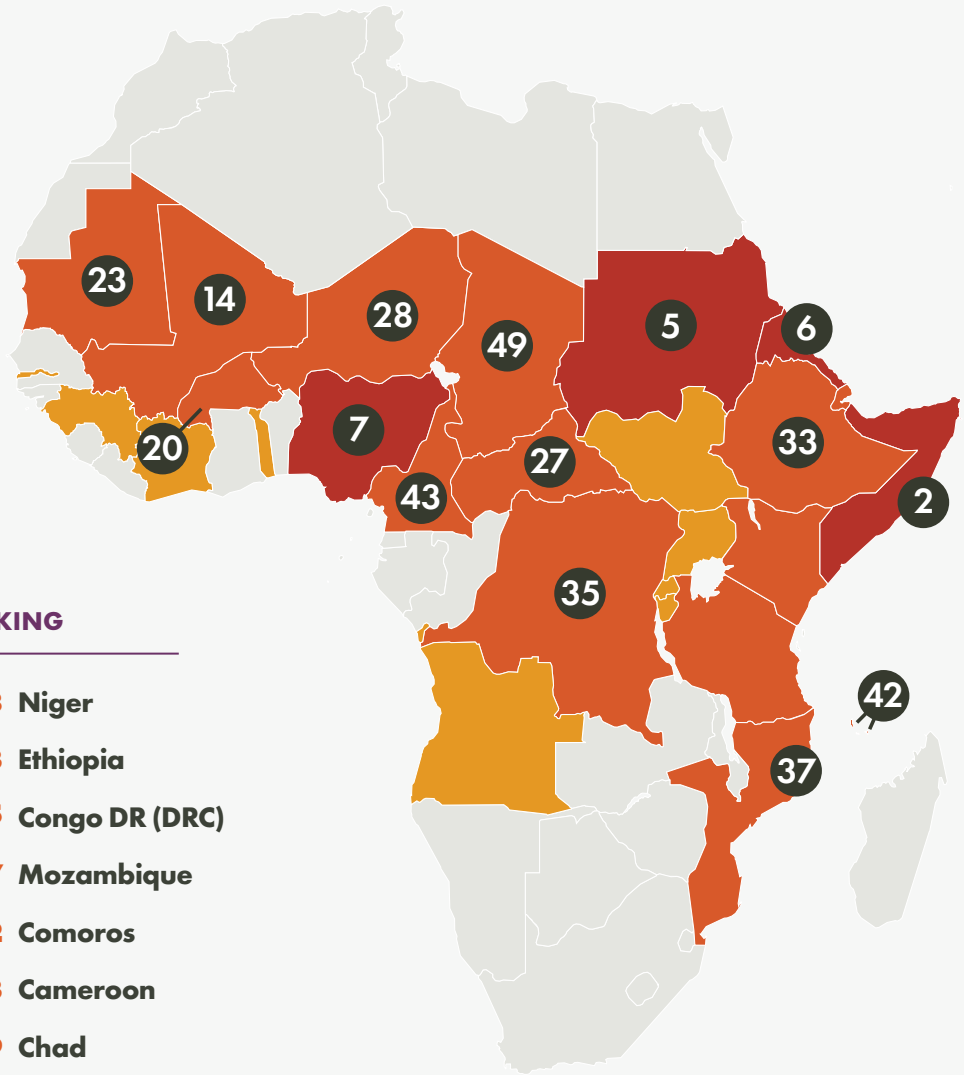


Abraham is camp leader in an IDP camp in Benue state, Nigeria

In January 2024, as part of Nigeria's Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council, the UK recommended that Nigeria 'protect civilians and ensure all violations of International Humanitarian Law and all human rights violations or abuses are fully investigated, ensuring accountability when civilians are unlawfully killed' and 'ensure that the human rights of those accused of blasphemy are protected and ensure accountability for related mob killings'.

PERSECUTION LEVELS

- HIGH
- VERY HIGH
- EXTREME



WORLD WATCH LIST RANKING

- | | |
|--|--------------------------|
| 2 Somalia | 28 Niger |
| 5 Sudan | 33 Ethiopia |
| 6 Eritrea | 35 Congo DR (DRC) |
| 7 Nigeria | 37 Mozambique |
| 14 Mali | 42 Comoros |
| 20 Burkina Faso | 43 Cameroon |
| 23 Mauritania | 49 Chad |
| 27 Central African Republic (CAR) | |

SUDAN (5)

Sudan's World Watch List total score increased three points during the 2025 reporting period. The increase was driven by the intensification of the civil war that broke out in the spring of 2023 between Sudan's army and an alliance of militias. Research for the 2025 World Watch List registered increases in the number of Christians killed and sexually assaulted, as well as the number of Christian homes and businesses attacked. In a country of 49 million people, the number of internally displaced people by mid-2024 had surpassed 7.7 million – the largest displacement crisis in the world.

Compounding the pressure on Christians is a racial component: those of indigenous African descent, as opposed to Arab ethnicity, are targets not only because of their faith but also due to their ethnic

identity. Christians of all backgrounds are trapped in the chaos, unable to flee. Churches are shelled, looted and occupied by the warring parties.



Alia, holding her sleeping child. Sudan

NOWHERE TO GO: violence and displacement in Myanmar

In Myanmar, Christians have been attacked by both sides in the country's civil war and have been forced to flee their homes. Widespread violence has prompted large-scale displacement in an area where Christians are already vulnerable to persecution and discrimination.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the 2021 military coup. Amid continued armed conflict between the army and a host of opposition forces in 2024, the country has risen four places on the World Watch List, to 13, coming for the first time into the 'extreme' persecution range, according to Open Doors' research. Millions of people have already been killed or displaced. Myanmar's Christians, who make up about eight per cent of the population, are caught up in the ongoing fighting.

This is not the place to detail the causes of Myanmar's turmoil, the conflicting forces and their shifting alliances, the influence of neighbouring China, or the refugee crisis across the border in Bangladesh. Suffice it to say here that there is little hope of a quick end to the war. The security situation in certain regions remains dire and has even deteriorated this year; and continued crimes against humanity are likely.

Displaced Christians are forced to live in IDP camps, take refuge in churches or flee to the jungles where

they lack food and healthcare. Since the beginning of the civil war, an estimated 2.8 million citizens of Myanmar have been displaced, a strong sign of how the conflict has escalated both in scale and in brutality. In Kachin state alone, more than 100,000 Christians are languishing in displacement camps for fear of being killed or detained by either the regime's forces or Kachin rebels.

Amid rising violence, the ruling military government has resorted to more aerial and missile attacks. The military government exercises martial law and restricts gatherings across the country. Widespread censorship also makes it difficult to learn more about the extent of the war and people's suffering.

The army increasingly attacks churches suspected of harbouring insurgents and has detained pastors and church members it surmises may be supporting or even leading opposition forces. It has launched indiscriminate attacks in some predominantly or strongly Christian states.



Persecuted and displaced believers, Myanmar

Attacks on Christians also come from ethnic insurgent forces. Christians living in the remote and border regions of Myanmar are hard-pressed not only by a government relentlessly attacking everyone it assumes to be connected to the opposition but also by groups profiting from the drugs trade and other lawless activities.

Pastor Mun's* situation illustrates how bad things have become. Because of the war, he was forced to flee his hometown in Chin State. "We have to leave our homes for our safety," he says. "We can no longer go to our churches. It is unsafe as churches are also targeted. Some people fled to the cities, while others fled to the nearby villages and jungle." Another displaced Christian from Kayah State, Moe Moe*, shared her ordeal with an Open Doors partner. "When our churches and houses were shot at and bombed, we had to flee. We have been displaced several times, and it is challenging to be on the run every time. Every day we must strive for our survival."

Converts to Christianity are particularly impacted by the violence. While Buddhist monks are somewhat divided over Myanmar's military coup, many with radical views support it. In areas with staunch Buddhist communities, life for Christians can be difficult. They can be forbidden from using common resources such as access to water. Evangelical and charismatic church groups can also experience opposition, especially those located in rural areas.

Mei Mei* is a Christian convert from a Buddhist background who lost her job, and with it her home. When the owner of her factory found out that Mei Mei had converted to Christianity, he beat her in front of other workers and kicked her and her husband out of the factory. Open Doors partners continue to stand alongside pastors and leaders by providing practical aid to Christians in need.

INSTABILITY IN THE WIDER REGION

Myanmar is not the only state in the region facing instability, nor the only one in which Christians may face difficulties. Christians in the state of Manipur, north east **India**, are still suffering from the results of violence there between the Meitei (mostly Hindu) and Kuki (mostly Christian) ethnic groups, which began around 3 May 2023. According to a report written for the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) Council of Experts in May 2024, marking one year since the initial violence, the situation was still bleak for Christians from both people groups. It noted that survivors of violence are still living with displacement and trauma, and therefore remain acutely vulnerable to additional violence. The report even documents cases of violence or intimidation as recently as India's elections last year. It lamented the lack of action by the BJP-led Indian government, and the slow and inadequate response, even alleged complicity, by law enforcement.

Meanwhile, in neighbouring **Bangladesh**, after long-term Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina fled the country in August 2024, the resulting unrest affected religious minorities such as Hindus and Christians. Many attacks, especially against converts, went unreported. Christians among the mainly Muslim Rohingya, who fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar, face harassment and strong pressure from their community as well.



Destroyed church in Manipur, India, as impact of the violence continues

YEMEN: displacement, violence and discrimination

After years of conflict and displacement Yemeni Christians face particular challenges. They are denied access to aid, apostasy is criminalised and converts face intense pressure to return to Islam. Tribalism exacerbates the persecution.

OVERVIEW OF PERSECUTION IN YEMEN

Years of conflict have resulted in more than 4.5 million Yemenis (14 per cent of the population) becoming internally displaced and 21.6 million people being left in need of humanitarian assistance. Members of Yemen's Christian community are often denied access to aid, leaving an already vulnerable minority without essential resources needed just to survive.

The Yemeni church is composed largely of converts from Islam. It faces extreme human rights violations, compounded by the country's ongoing civil war and humanitarian crisis. In Yemen Christians are subject to systematic violations of freedom of religion or belief, including threats, detention, torture and death. Attacks may come from multiple sources: family members, tribal leaders, government authorities, Houthi rebels, radical Islamist groups such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh, and tribal norms that harshly punish those leaving Islam.

Despite some improvements this year, Yemen is still ranked sixth in the Fund for Peace Fragile States Index 2024²⁶ and third in the World Watch List. The situation for Christians remains very difficult. Yemen's territory is currently divided between three major parties: the internationally recognised Yemeni government, the *de facto* government run by the Houthis (ostensibly backed by Iran), and the *de facto* government formed by the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC), backed by the UAE.

The humanitarian crisis has led to widespread hunger, malnutrition and a lack of healthcare. Christians in Yemen, however, face an additional layer of vulnerability and struggle to access international aid. Open Doors sources report discrimination against religious minorities in accessing aid and emergency supplies. Local

Muslim organisations contracted for humanitarian aid distribution have been reported as giving preferential treatment to Muslim beneficiaries. This is particularly true for women from religious minorities in displacement settings who are excluded from receiving aid.

The discriminatory practices in aid distribution are most pronounced in areas controlled by the Houthi rebel group. In these regions, international aid is channelled exclusively through the Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (SCMCHA), a Houthi-owned body. This monopoly over aid distribution has again led to reports of preferential treatment for Muslim beneficiaries.

Informal churches in the country have faced intensifying persecution over recent decades and must operate in secret. Converts to Christianity face intense societal pressure to recant their faith. Denouncing Islam is seen as a betrayal of family honour, and punishment for apostasy can include death or banishment. Both male and female converts risk severe consequences, including divorce, the loss of custody of their children, and house arrest. For women, the situation is particularly dire, with reports of female Christian converts being imprisoned in their homes and treated as hostages.

Yemen's tribal system exacerbates this issue. Economic, political and social lives revolve around tribal affiliations, and leaving Islam is seen as a deep violation of tribal loyalty. This tribal influence, combined with the legal framework that criminalises apostasy, leaves converts with no legal protections.

Yemen's legal and constitutional framework further entrenches discrimination against Christians. While the constitution guarantees freedom of

²⁶ World Population Review, 2024, Fragile States Index 2024

thought and expression, it does not explicitly protect freedom of religion or belief. Islam is enshrined as the state religion, and Sharia (Islamic law) serves as the source of all legislation. Article 259 of the Yemeni Criminal Code criminalises apostasy, with punishment that can include the death penalty. Public expression of Christian beliefs, possession of Christian literature or even displaying Christian symbols can result in imprisonment, physical violence or death.

In Houthi-controlled areas, Christians and other religious minorities are closely monitored, and the possession of Christian materials is often used as evidence of apostasy. The Personal Status Law further restricts Christian converts by prohibiting

interfaith marriages, leaving many converts unable to marry someone who shares their newfound faith.

Attacks on informal Christian gatherings, particularly house churches, are common. These meetings have been targeted by the Houthi government and terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Daesh. Church leaders, charity workers and beneficiaries of Christian aid organisations face the constant threat of being kidnapped or killed. Churches across Yemen have been destroyed, and a number of house churches have had to stop meeting. Members of religious minorities face arbitrary detention and forced disappearance.

CASE STUDY: ZAHRA

One gloomy weekday, Zahra* received the call: “Anis* was killed.” Anis had worked closely with Zahra in Christian ministry in Yemen. When extremists took over the town they worked in, Anis started receiving threats: “You infidel... we will kill you.” A week later, extremists killed Anis at midday – in front of his children. “He was killed because he was a Christian,” Zahra shares with tears in her eyes.

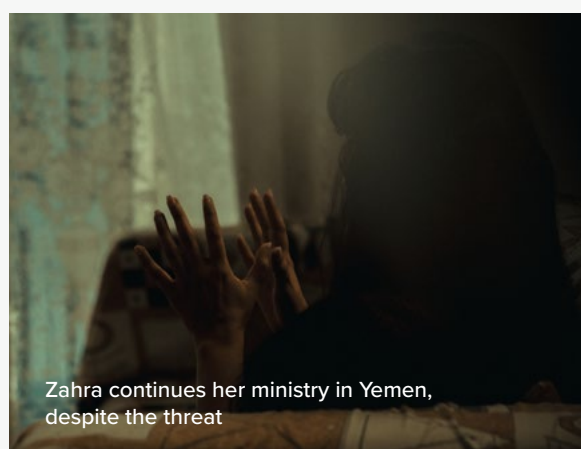
But Zahra always knew she could be targeted next. It is daunting to live as a Christian in a country such as Yemen, especially as a woman. Growing up, Zahra navigated a complex course between two worlds: her personal faith in Jesus and external conformity to her culture. Her father was a Christian, who instructed her to keep her faith to herself at school. Nonetheless, she was bullied for her faith, and her father sometimes had to flee the family home during dangerous times. In her formative years, Zahra didn’t have the option of going to church to grow in faith: there are no official churches in Yemen, only house churches that meet in secret.

“When you convert, especially as a woman, you are looked at as someone who has sold herself to this ‘other world’,” Zahra says. “It is extremely difficult to face society.

“If you make a decision to ‘follow Jesus’, your family will most likely confine you inside the house – basically a permanent imprisonment. This is mainly because of the family’s honour. While if a young man decides to follow Jesus, it can be easier sometimes, since men can leave the house after a certain age and will be able to live alone, unlike a single girl. There is no such thing as a woman living alone. The culture does not accept it.”

Today, Zahra serves as the leader of a women’s ministry in Yemen. She knows she is followed by secret police. “We live among wolves, and we know that,” she explains. “We know that very well.”

However, this does not stop her ministry. “We are afraid of the extremists and the government itself as, at this point, they all work together against Christians.”



Zahra continues her ministry in Yemen, despite the threat

STORIES OF RESILIENCE

BEDRU*: ETHIOPIA

In Ethiopia, Bedru's* house and farm were burned down when he and his family chose to become Christians. "We stood there singing, 'King of Heaven and Earth, Lord, have mercy on us.' Like that I prayed, holding my children together." When the family was singing beside their burning house, something even more terrible happened. The youngest son, who at the time was still a toddler, was thrown into the flames. Bedru says "I ran back into the flames and rescued him and also some of my cattle."

"A few times people have poured chemicals on my yield. They have stolen my maize. They threatened to take some of my land. Despite all of this, my wife and I have never felt like leaving the faith. Even my children do not want to go back."

His wife Tibi* says "Most of my relatives told me, 'Leave this Christian faith and come back to us. We will help you to raise your children. We will give you a home and take care of you.' They really tried hard to make me leave my husband. But I told them, 'What God gives me is much better than what you promise me.'"

Bedru and Tibi's children are also not spared the pressure and ridicule for following Christ. "My children are being betrayed by their friends, they intimidate them saying that they will never get married. But they respond that God is their feeder, and that they don't care about anything else."

Though the family still faces insults and threats on a daily basis, the harshest persecution has passed – at least for now. As a subsistence farmer, Bedru grows coffee and sells the beans

to generate just enough money to keep his family afloat. While others would understandably move away to somewhere safer, Bedru wanted to return to his farm despite the dangers it harboured. Through our partners in Ethiopia, Open Doors supported this family to restart their lives after this incident. Bedru received oxen to help him work the land and we helped him build a new house.

LI*: CHINA

In April 2024, Li went to visit an underground church in China, to understand and share in their experiences. However, when he arrived, this group of Christians were desperate to know how to respond to and prepare for the worsening persecution that they are experiencing. Usually, the training that Li gives to Christians such as these lasts three days, but the assembled group are elderly and struggled to sit in cramped conditions on the hard floor. They also knew that the longer they met together, the more likely it was they would be caught.

Li heard that recently a large church had been discovered by the police and the worshippers scattered. There are between 30 and 40 unregistered churches in the area, and most have gone unnoticed. But they are facing harsher and harsher restrictions, and they say that the government is trying to force their faith out of China.

There are millions of Christians like them across China, attending unregistered churches, which they believe better represent their faith. Every day, these men and women gather at 4 or 5am to pray for their nation and for the many secret Christians who, like them, live in fear.



Li delivers impromptu persecution survival training to an underground church in China

MOHAMMAD*: AFGHANISTAN

Mohammad was angry when he discovered that his brother had become a Christian. He had heard that Christians were idolaters and sought to wreck his society. However, when he finally agreed to meet some of his brother's friends, he was startled by the love that they had for one another. "In the past, I heard negative things about Christians," he explains. "But when I went to the group, I only saw that everything in Christianity is good and aligns with God's will, and the Christians that I have seen in that fellowship, they only behaved well"

"When I went to the group, I only saw that everything in Christianity is good"

He wrestled with his faith for six months after that first meeting, before finally deciding to become a Christian. He wanted to go back to the group where he had first experienced Christian community, but he discovered they had stopped meeting after two of their members had been killed.

He decided to start a group in his own house but knows the risk is high. "They are not able to keep the Bible app on their phone because the Taliban checks [people's] mobile phones at checkpoints," he says. "Sometimes when you leave your house to go to another part of the country or another part of the city, the Taliban might check the phone. I heard some people were stopped by the Taliban, and they saw something Christian on [the people's] phone and [the people] were sent to jail. Some Christians are still in jail now."

Through one of its partners, Open Doors helped Mohammad grow in his faith and he, in turn, went to different regions in Afghanistan to counsel other Christians. He has now left the country but helps with online publications of the Bible and other literature.

KASINDI-LUBIRIGHA CHURCH: DRC

This church in the town of Kasindi-Lubirigha lost 15 people, and 71 of its members were injured, when it was bombed by the Allied Democratic Forces, rebel extremists linked to the Islamic State group.

Yet on the one-year anniversary of the 15 January 2023 attack, the church gathered to remember their loved ones and celebrate God's faithfulness in the face of trials – in the very place where the attack took place.

"People stared at us in wonder as we marched on the streets of Kasindi," said Pastor Kambale. The weekend's celebrations brought together worship musicians, singers and dancers of all ages. Even victims of the attack attended the event, and the church also baptised 15 new believers.

Days after the 2023 attack, the Islamic State group (IS) claimed responsibility, once again confirming the Allied Democratic Forces' alliance with IS. The bombing left Christians traumatised and plunged them into economic hardship. Through our local partners, Open Doors came alongside the church to provide practical and emotional support. The team visited survivors in hospital and, two months after the attack, provided relief packages to 107 families, as well as monthly trauma sessions to survivors.



Church celebrations on the first anniversary of the ADF attack

FORB AND THE UK'S GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY

Over the last decade, the UK has established itself as a global leader in defending freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). The 2019 Truro Review was key in reshaping the UK's approach towards promoting FoRB, both within the FCDO and through British diplomatic influence.

Over the last ten years, there has been an increasing need for a coordinated international response to address the growing issue of religious persecution and rising levels of discrimination against religious or belief groups. These include Christians, Muslims, Jews, Yazidis, Humanists and others. The response to Daesh (or so-called Islamic State), moved FoRB up the international agenda and prompted the UK to refine its policies and diplomatic strategies on the subject

THE TRURO REVIEW

In 2018 Jeremy Hunt, then-Foreign Secretary, commissioned an independent review to assess how effectively the then Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO, now the FCDO) was supporting persecuted Christians globally. The review expanded its scope to look at FoRB abuses targeting people of all faiths and none, and highlighted that persecution had reached 'near genocide levels' in some regions. It also identified gaps in the UK response.

The review made 22 recommendations, including:

- The appointment of a Special Envoy for FoRB.
- Mandatory religious literacy training for diplomats.
- The establishment of an early-warning mechanism for atrocities involving religious persecution.
- The imposition of targeted sanctions against individuals responsible for FoRB violations.

The UK government accepted all 22 recommendations and has implemented most of them – though a 2022 review noted that some had not been implemented completely. These changes have shaped the FCDO's approach to human rights, ensuring that FoRB is integrated into broader foreign policy objectives.

KEY OUTCOMES OF THE TRURO REVIEW

- **Special Envoy for FoRB.** There have been four post-holders in this role, which has elevated the UK's advocacy on FoRB globally. The Envoy works with governments, faith leaders and civil society to address FoRB violations. Furthermore, for the two years leading up to 2024, the UK chaired the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA, now known as the Article 18 Alliance). During this time, the Alliance grew from 33 to 42 member states.
- **Diplomatic training.** Enhanced training on religious literacy was introduced for FCDO staff in key posts and funding was made available to expand capabilities for country desks.
- **Targeted sanctions.** FoRB concerns have been addressed through the UK's Magnitsky-style sanctions regime, targeting individuals and entities responsible for human rights abuses.

THE 2022 INTERNATIONAL MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE ON FORB

In July 2022, the UK hosted the International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief in London. The London Ministerial saw the largest gathering of IRFBA members and included representatives from more than 100 countries, alongside civil society organisations and faith leaders. The event focused on practical actions to combat religious persecution, including strengthening international coalitions and increasing funding for grassroots initiatives.

The conference reinforced the UK's leadership in promoting FoRB, with outcomes including new pledges of support for persecuted groups and the establishment of international partnerships. It also highlighted the UK's commitment to addressing both systemic discrimination and acute crises such as those faced by Uyghur Muslims in China and Christians in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION: a challenge to the UK government

The number of elections taking place worldwide in 2024 was a record, with more than 100 countries going to the polls, and over half the world's population exercising their right to vote – including in the UK. Despite this global display of democracy, in the past 12 months many Christians around the world have been denied their basic rights as citizens on the grounds of their faith. These are rights that all citizens should enjoy without discrimination. Yet, in democracies as well as authoritarian regimes, these rights are limited to those following the majority religion, or are conditional on Christians practising their faith in private and not bringing their beliefs into the public square.

In recent years, the UK has shown great leadership in promoting freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). In January 2024, the UK took a clear stand urging the Nigerian government through its Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council to ensure accountability for unlawful civilian deaths, and to take steps to protect those accused of blasphemy.

The current UK government must take this forward, providing support for Nigeria to implement what the UK and others have recommended.

The UK faces significant challenges in maintaining its FoRB leadership amid rising authoritarianism and state fragility. But we urge the UK government to strengthen its focus on FoRB and not lose the leadership position the UK has achieved. The 2024 International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Berlin was the first without a UK Special Envoy on FoRB and we are delighted that the Government has now appointed David Smith MP to the role.

Open Doors is committed to supporting the new Special Envoy, UK parliamentarians and all other stakeholders to enable the UK to continue to use its voice, in international institutions or in direct engagement with countries of concern, to speak up for Christians and others who are being denied their fundamental rights on account of their faith or beliefs.



The 2022 International Ministerial Conference on FoRB, held in London

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

- Promote and protect freedom of religion or belief as a leading priority in foreign policy and diplomatic engagement, both at a bilateral level and through the UK's role at the UN.
- Support the newly appointed UK Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, ensure that the role is properly resourced within the FCDO, and consider establishing the role permanently in statute.
- Work with partners in international institutions to address the persecution of Christians with other governments around the world (for example, by making FoRB-focused recommendations in the context of Iran's forthcoming Universal Periodic Review).
- Set out the support which it intends to provide to the government of Nigeria in implementing UK recommendations made as part of its 2024 Universal Periodic Review (specifically, on ensuring accountability for unlawful civilian deaths and protection for those accused of blasphemy).
- Ensure that foreign aid to Yemen is distributed using methods that do not disadvantage religious minority communities – particularly in Houthi areas – and introduce measures for UK foreign aid to ensure religious minority communities are not denied access to funds or other support based on religion or belief.
- Use the opportunities presented by trade negotiations in the coming years to promote human rights and FoRB around the world, and to demonstrate commitment to this by publishing a trade strategy which sets out explicitly how trade deals will protect and uphold human rights for people of all faiths and none.

- Ensure that UK support for those who have fled persecution as refugees or IDPs on the grounds of religion or belief addresses the specific vulnerabilities of different faith groups in countries around the world.
- Recognise the gender-specific nature of the persecution of women and girls from religious minorities in relevant FCDO strategies. Gender- and religion-specific vulnerabilities must be considered when designing strategies to tackle protection, displacement, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, development and human rights generally.
- Acknowledge human rights concerns around emerging technology, taking the lead on developing international standards and ethical frameworks around the export and use of technology and AI around the world.

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.
- 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.

OPEN DOORS ADVOCACY

Open Doors UK & Ireland is part of a global NGO, operating in more than 70 countries for over 70 years with a call to ‘strengthen what remains’ for Christian communities facing serious persecution. Open Doors’ advocacy work supports Christians by protecting and promoting freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) as defined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This covers both private belief and public practice.

As the Open Doors Advocacy team, we operate in three main spheres:

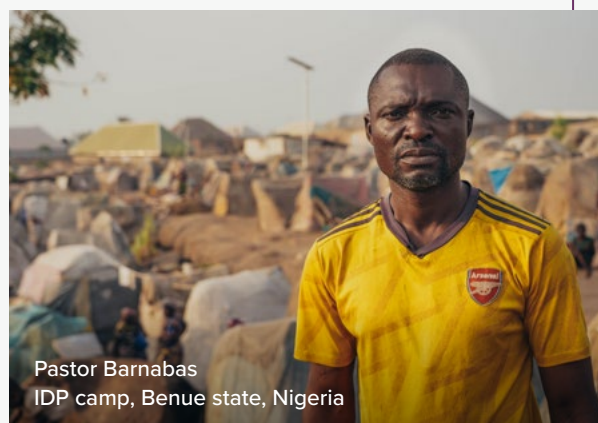
- **Internationally:** at the United Nations and European Union, as well as through engagement with other NGOs and international institutions.
- **Nationally:** in legislatures worldwide, including the UK parliament.
- **Locally:** offering legal support and human rights training for persecuted Christians globally.

Open Doors has continued to highlight the plight of persecuted Christians to MPs and ministers. We play an active role in the All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief as a stakeholder, and we continue to be a stakeholder in the UK FoRB Forum. The Open Doors Advocacy team rely on our partners on the ground to give us the latest up-to-date information to ensure that we can speak up for the most persecuted in the public sphere. The World Watch List allows us to discern global trends, highlight new and emerging areas of concern, and identify where our work has made the most difference. World Watch List data remains a trusted and credible source of information about the persecution of Christians globally, and is frequently referred to in the media, as well as in parliamentary reports and debates.

If you are a parliamentarian, civil servant, third-sector worker or journalist and would like to receive Open Doors briefing materials or further information, please contact Open Doors UK & Ireland’s Advocacy team at advocacy@opendoorsuk.org

ARISE AFRICA

Open Doors is currently running a multi-year campaign entitled *Arise Africa*. Initiated by African church leaders, the campaign aims to see the global community acknowledge and act against extreme violence and support the church to persevere – and to be resilient, resourceful and influential.



Pastor Barnabas
IDP camp, Benue state, Nigeria

Arise Africa aims to raise awareness, financial support, advocacy and prayer for Christians facing violent persecution in sub-Saharan Africa. As part of the campaign, we have launched the *Arise Africa* petition.²⁷

The petition aims to stop the violence by calling upon the global community to ensure that Christians and other vulnerable individuals in sub-Saharan Africa are treated with dignity and respect through:

- **Protection:** providing robust protection from violent militant attacks.
- **Justice:** ensuring justice through fair prosecutions of the attackers.
- **Restoration:** bringing healing and restoration to all affected communities.

The petition will be open until 2026, and will then be presented to the EU, the UN, the African Union and governments around the world.

²⁷ Open Doors UK & Ireland, 2024, Arise Africa Campaign

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Open Doors is committed to the highest level of research and reporting. The World Watch List, produced annually, is the product of intensive year-round monitoring by the World Watch Research (WWR) department of Open Doors. They have worked diligently over the years to create a ranking system that accurately portrays Christian persecution globally, resulting in a rounded and nuanced ranking that remains trusted around the world. The reporting period for the World Watch List 2025 was 1 October 2023 to 30 September 2024.

WWR works with country researchers and their in-country networks to collect detailed data on the nature of the various pressures and violence faced by Christian communities worldwide. The contributions of external experts are used to cross-check the results. Due to the nature of persecution, many incidents, particularly in nations such as North Korea, China, Libya and Myanmar, go unreported. This means that findings are likely to under-represent the real scope of Christian persecution. However, Open Doors has consistently chosen to underestimate rather than over-estimate to ensure the highest levels of credibility and accuracy.

The data collected covers freedom of religion for Christians in their private, family, community and national spheres of life, along with the freedom of Christians to gather together as the church. These five areas comprise what is referred to as the 'squeeze' (i.e. non-violent) component of persecution. Violence against Christians, which is referred to as the 'smash' element of persecution, is measured separately. While violence against Christians remains the most 'eye-catching' form of persecution, the 'squeeze' is the most defining form of persecution for Christians in many World Watch List countries. For each country surveyed, scores for the six categories are designated and then aggregated to determine a score out of a possible hundred. These scores determine a country's ranking on the World Watch List.

The definition of Christian used in this report is: "Anyone who self-identifies as a Christian and/or someone belonging to a Christian community as defined by the church's historic creeds."

For more detailed information on the World Watch List methodology, please visit: opendoorsuk.org/methodology

Q&A

Is the research purely internal or is it corroborated by external sources?

The World Watch List is independently audited by the **International Institute for Religious Freedom**. This audit is conducted by a team of scholars with expertise on freedom of religion or belief in the countries and regions included in the List. Audits assess the process of data-gathering, evaluation and scoring of the World Watch List.

The last audit found that the scoring of the World Watch List provided a 'valid and accurate reflection of the reality on the ground' and the report reflected a 'precise, well-balanced, and detailed overview of discrimination and persecution of Christians worldwide'. An Audit Statement is published in January each year and can be found at iirf.global/category/news

What is the definition of persecution used by this report?

The definition of persecution used in World Watch List analysis is: "Any hostility experienced as a result of one's identification with Christ. 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."²⁸

This report refers to both persecution and discrimination, and this is reflected in the research. One of the strengths of the World Watch List is its ability to track emerging trends, act as an early warning before situations deteriorate and signal broader issues with fundamental rights, governance and the rule of law within different countries.

How is the data for the World Watch List gathered?

Country scores are based on detailed data gathered through a combination of inputs.

This includes grassroots research, expert input and thorough analysis, including through:

- **In-country networks:** local contributors provide firsthand information about persecution incidents and pressures.
- **Open Doors researchers:** experts within the organisation compile data using structured questionnaires.
- **External experts:** these independent analysts cross-check and validate the data to enhance reliability.
- **World Watch analysts:** they synthesise all inputs and create a final score for each country.

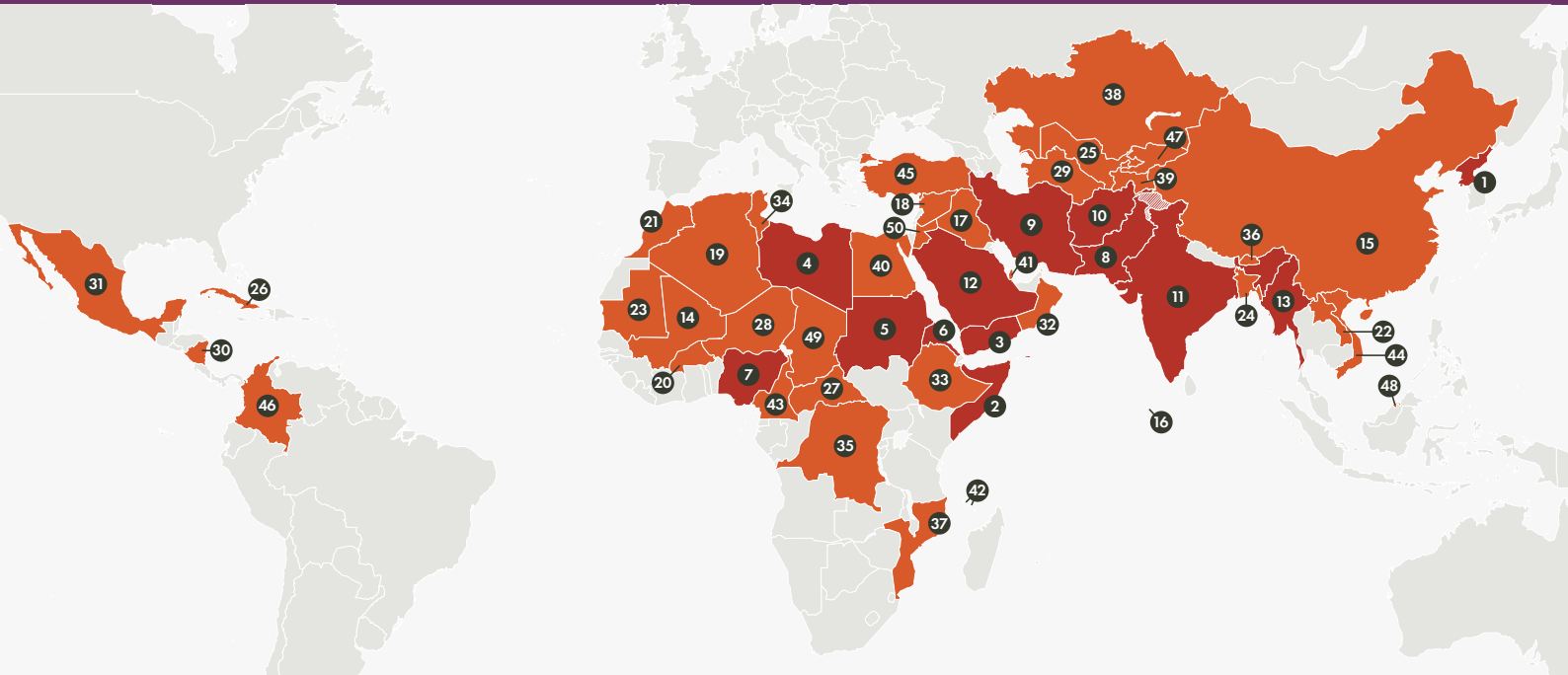
How are country scores determined?

The scoring process is drawn from six thematic blocks contributing to a maximum country score of 100. These blocks are:

- **Private life:** pressure experienced in personal religious expression such as owning a Bible.
- **Family life:** challenges within the family setting, including forced religious identity for children or converts being forced to divorce.
- **Community life:** hostilities within local communities, including harassment or the denial of community resources such as water or electricity.
- **National life:** the impact of national laws and policies leading to discrimination in public services or hate speech.
- **Church life:** restrictions on collective Christian activities, such as the ability to attend a church or register a place of worship.
- **Violence:** acts of physical violence, including killings and forced displacement.

²⁸ Open Doors, 2024, Complete World Watch List Methodology

THE 2025 OPEN DOORS WORLD WATCH LIST TOP 50



● EXTREME LEVELS OF PERSECUTION

● VERY HIGH LEVELS OF PERSECUTION

- | | | | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 North Korea | 11 India | 21 Morocco | 31 Mexico | 41 Qatar |
| 2 Somalia | 12 Saudi Arabia | 22 Laos | 32 Oman | 42 Comoros |
| 3 Yemen | 13 Myanmar | 23 Mauritania | 33 Ethiopia | 43 Cameroon |
| 4 Libya | 14 Mali | 24 Bangladesh | 34 Tunisia | 44 Vietnam |
| 5 Sudan | 15 China | 25 Uzbekistan | 35 Congo DR (DRC) | 45 Turkey |
| 6 Eritrea | 16 Maldives | 26 Cuba | 36 Bhutan | 46 Colombia |
| 7 Nigeria | 17 Iraq | 27 Central African Republic | 37 Mozambique | 47 Kyrgyzstan |
| 8 Pakistan | 18 Syria | 28 Niger | 38 Kazakhstan | 48 Brunei |
| 9 Iran | 19 Algeria | 29 Turkmenistan | 39 Tajikistan | 49 Chad |
| 10 Afghanistan | 20 Burkina Faso | 30 Nicaragua | 40 Egypt | 50 Jordan |



SERVING PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS WORLDWIDE

opendoorsuk.org | advocacy@opendoorsuk.org

Open Doors UK & I, PO Box 6, Witney, OX29 6WG

