



# WORLD WATCH LIST 2026



**STRIKING AT THE FOUNDATIONS**

OPEN DOORS ADVOCACY REPORT

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# INTRODUCTION

Last year at the World Watch List launch we showed a heart-breaking video from Nigeria featuring a camp for internally displaced people (IDPs). Pastor Barnabas, the Christian leader interviewed, said, “Millions of Christians are displaced in Nigeria and the whole of Africa. News doesn’t cover it. Nobody talks about it. We are remaining in the darkness.”

At the end of 2025 the international media and politicians did finally begin to talk about it. But we still see little action. According to Open Doors’ research Nigeria remains the country where more Christians are killed for their faith than all other countries put together. We call on the UK government and international community to support the Nigerian government in trying to stop the violence and start the healing. Several years ago the extremist violence started in Nigeria and swept across the region, now it is time for justice and restoration to do the same.

Equal rights for all citizens was one of the promises made by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria when it overthrew the Assad regime in December 2024. Sadly, this year's research shows that has not yet been achieved. Syria now ranks at No. 6, up from No. 18 in 2025. Violent extremists are exploiting the country's instability as the new government tries to find its feet. The bombing of Mar Elias Greek Orthodox church in Damascus last June killed 22 Christians and more recently 14 Christian schools were closed in the Kurdish region for refusing to adopt a new curriculum.

Elsewhere we have seen ongoing attacks on recent converts and increasing numbers of targeted attacks on church leaders. In some countries the smash of violence is being replaced by the squeeze of church closures as the persecutors become smarter and more focussed. In others, such as Libya, Afghanistan, North Korea and Somalia the church is driven deeper and deeper underground as the pressure intensifies.

But do not be fooled. Where the church is invisible, massively diminished in numbers, or appears to have been silenced, the resilience of the followers of Jesus Christ has risen to the fore. Christians remain a force for good in societies all over the globe, loving their neighbours, standing up for justice and truth, advocating for freedom of religion or belief for people of all faiths and none, and praying for the prosperity and wellbeing of their nations and their leaders.

Of the ten priority countries identified in the FCDO's FoRB strategy in 2025, eight are in the top 20 countries on our 2026 World Watch List. We are encouraged to see this government make FoRB a major pillar of its foreign policy and we urge them to follow through on the commitments they have made.

Thank you for all you are doing to promote Freedom of Religion or Belief and strengthen the church around the world.



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

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. More than 388 million Christians face high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith. In Open Doors' World Watch List top 50 countries alone, 315 million Christians face very high or extreme levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith.
2. Of the 4,849 Christians killed worldwide during the World Watch List 2026 reporting period because of their Christian identity, 3,490 were in Nigeria, an increase from 3,100 in the previous year. Militant violence in sub-Saharan Africa has led to the deaths of thousands of Christians and has displaced many more. This extreme violence is enabled by a lack of capacity by national governments to protect their own citizens, whether in the context of civil war or against armed militants.
3. Attacks on Christian leaders have been reported in many countries. In this report, we focus on cases from Latin America. Despite many Latin American countries being majority Christian, Christian leaders can be targeted, either by an authoritarian state such as Nicaragua seeking to silence dissent, or by armed groups seeking control, as in Colombia.
4. Again, a repeated theme has been the targeting of recent converts. Families, communities and local and national authorities place particular pressure on Christian converts in order to force them back into their original faith. Female converts, for example, can suffer domestic abuse or imprisonment, while local and national governments sometimes prohibit conversion. Our report gives examples from India and Iran.
5. In some contexts, Christians are targeted through attacks on their ability to meet together, as governments simply shut down local Christian gatherings. This year's World Watch List continues to report on the impact of such closures in Algeria and other parts of North Africa, as well as in China. Such actions drive Christians into isolation.
6. Several countries in which Christians suffer high or extreme levels of persecution lie within conflict zones or in areas of great strategic significance. Our regional focus on East Africa, bordering the Red Sea, is a key example. The region contains three of the countries in the World Watch List top ten. This highlights the importance of understanding challenges to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) as governments and multilateral institutions alike seek to address global trouble spots.
7. In some regions of the world, the longstanding presence of the Christian church leaves it dangerously exposed. Syria is a key example as it has climbed back into the top ten due to an increase in violence. The Christian population is concentrated in big cities and other locations that have been battlegrounds for strategic control of the country. Their churches are well known and despite a much-diminished population, Christian communities are large enough to be visible and are therefore targeted.
8. Persecution, both violent and non-violent, is increasingly subtle or targeted, making it hard to make broad statements about individual countries. In some countries, violent insurgency dominates in one region, but instability spreads through the whole country. In other parts of the world, particular denominations or leaders are singled out for attack, which undermines the human rights of all. In still other contexts, persecution is increasingly hidden, against Christians who are forced to go underground in closed countries. This makes it harder to get accurate information, even in the face of egregious human rights abuses.

Despite this grim picture, the research also reveals many Christians remaining resilient in the face of persecution and chaos. From Christian leaders standing up to authoritarian rule in Nicaragua, to recent converts encouraging other women despite intimidation in India, to a church counselling school set up in the midst of Syria's war, Christians are standing strong and defying persecution and discrimination around the world.

In 2025, the UK government published its new Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) strategy, as a commitment to making FoRB a major pillar of its foreign policy. Of the ten priority countries identified in that strategy by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), eight are in the top 20 countries on our World Watch List this year.

Policymakers must fully understand the persecution and discrimination faced by Christians. Only then will UK human rights advocacy deliver change for people of all faiths and none who suffer violations of their right to freedom of religion or belief. We urge the government to act on the commitments it has made in the FoRB strategy and we ask MPs and peers to hold the government accountable for the goals which it has set.



Many Christians live for years in makeshift shelters in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs)

# EXTREME VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

Of the 4,849 Christians killed worldwide because of their Christian identity during the World Watch List 2026 reporting period, some 3,490 of them were killed in Nigeria, up from 3,100 the previous year.

In a single incident in June 2025, the Christian farming community of Yelwata in Benue State came under a four-hour attack by ethnic Fulani militants. They shot or burned to death more than 200 people, mostly women and children. There was little military response.

**Nigeria (7):** Africa's most populous nation and home to the continent's largest Christian population, has ranked in the World Watch List top ten since 2021. The country is beset by a severe combination of ethno-religious hostility, Islamist militancy, weak governance and organised crime.

The Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA) noted in May 2025 that Nigeria is experiencing a convergence of threats from Islamist terror groups, both existing and newly-emerging. This is combined with a resurgence of Fulani ethnic militia attacks in the country's Middle Belt.<sup>1</sup> To the north west, the Lakurawa group employs sophisticated weaponry to advance an Islamist agenda that is affiliated with Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM). This is an expansionist al-Qaeda insurgency. Reports also emerged in 2025 of a new group, Mahmuda, attacking rural communities in the west of the country. About 3.4 million Nigerians remain internally displaced. Entering his third year in office in mid-2025, Nigerian President Bola Tinubu has remained unsuccessful in his declared intent to take decisive action against violence in the country. In the north east, Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province in 2025 launched attacks on military facilities, demonstrating improving tactical capabilities. "Their ability to challenge the Nigerian military directly represents a significant shift in the security landscape," the Observatory said.

## HOW WE REACH THESE NUMBERS

- Our figure of 3,490 Christians killed for their faith in Nigeria refers to civilian Christians whose deaths can be linked to their Christian identity or Christian community affiliation. It does not include the following:
  - Battle deaths of state security forces or members of armed groups
  - General criminal violence where no faith-related targeting can be established
  - Unverified or anecdotal reports that cannot be confirmed.

Our estimate draws on a combination of quantitative data and qualitative, on-the-ground verification. Open Doors has long-term partnerships with churches, community leaders, human rights defenders and local researchers across Nigeria. These partners submit incident reports of attacks, killings, abductions and other abuses, which are verified and cross-checked against other reports. Where there is uncertainty in casualty counts (for example, 'at least 20' versus 'around 30'), we use the lower, clearly-substantiated figure.

We aim to confirm incidents wherever possible and only include killings that meet a defined evidential threshold. In this process we use the work of other organisations, including that of the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA), a respected Dutch research organisation. For more information about our methodology, please see page 29.

<sup>1</sup> ORFA, 2025, ['The illusion of progress: Mapping Nigeria's deteriorating security landscape'](#), 29 May 2025.

## INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

Any policy responses to extreme violence in Nigeria which focus on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) must deal with attacks on those of all faiths and none. Christians are not the only ones who suffer persecution on grounds of faith or belief in Nigeria, whether in the context of extreme violence against communities or targeted attacks against those accused of blasphemy. Open Doors findings do not diminish the suffering of other groups (such as Muslims) in the context of violence in Nigeria. In fact, ORFA's data show that thousands of Muslims have also been killed and abducted. Nonetheless, focusing on civilian deaths and relative risk, Christians in the affected regions face disproportionate violence.<sup>2</sup>

Public interest in the persecution of Christians in Nigeria has grown significantly in recent months, following its designation as a 'country of particular concern' and associated comments from US President Donald Trump.<sup>3</sup> However, the deteriorating FoRB situation in Nigeria has long been a concern of UK policymakers and parliamentarians. For example, extreme violence in Nigeria was the subject of two reports from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief. *The first (Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?)* was published in 2020,<sup>4</sup> with a second report giving a three-year update on trends.<sup>5</sup> Attacks on Christians in Nigeria have also been a significant subject of parliamentary debate.<sup>6</sup>

## PROVIDING PROTECTION

In the 2024 Universal Periodic Review on Nigeria at the UN Human Rights Council, the UK made one recommendation to Nigeria explicitly on FoRB abuses, regarding providing protection from mob violence for those accused of blasphemy. It also made a further recommendation on providing accountability when civilians are unlawfully killed.<sup>7</sup> In addition, in 2025, the UK placed Nigeria on its list of ten priority countries for its FoRB strategy.

Nigeria's multiple security threats show no sign of abating, and it is vital that recent international attention on the crisis in the country drives sustainable change for Nigeria's Christians. The 2024 Open Doors *No Road Home* report<sup>8</sup> makes several recommendations:

- An urgent increase in humanitarian support, as current programming and funding levels are insufficient to meet the needs caused by the escalating crises in Nigeria
- Development by the Nigerian government of a national policy to end impunity, paying specific attention to implementing the recommendations of the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions<sup>9</sup>
- Support for the Nigerian government in tracking and removing illegal weapons, and in disarming militant groups.

<sup>2</sup> See: [orfa.africa](http://orfa.africa).

<sup>3</sup> See: USCIRF (2025) ['Naming of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern is an important step to advance religious freedom'](#), 3 November 2025. See also: The Telegraph, 2025, ['It really is that simple: Christians are being killed for being Christians'](#), Tim Stanley, 24 November 2025. See also: The Times, 2025, ['Church shooting in Nigeria adds fuel to Trump's persecution claims'](#).

<sup>4</sup> The All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2020, ['Nigeria: Unfolding genocide? New APPG report launched'](#).

<sup>5</sup> The All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2023, ['Nigeria: Unfolding genocide? Three years on'](#).

<sup>6</sup> Hansard, 6 February 2024, ['Freedom of religion and belief in Nigeria'](#).

See also: Hansard, 9 March 2023, ['Nigeria: Killing and abduction of Christians'](#).

See also: Hansard, 27 April 2023, ['Christians in Nigeria'](#).

<sup>7</sup> UK government, 2024, ['45th Universal Periodic Review of human rights: UK statement on Nigeria'](#).

<sup>8</sup> Open Doors, 2024, ['No Road Home'](#).

<sup>9</sup> OHCHR, 2021, ['A/HRC/47/33/Add.2: Visit to Nigeria - Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Agnès Callamard'](#).

# BEYOND NIGERIA

## Violence in sub-Saharan Africa

Deadly violence against Christians is increasing in sub-Saharan Africa. Among the 14 sub-Saharan countries on the 2026 World Watch List top 50, five have witnessed the overthrow of their governments, two have suspended their constitutions, and five are in the grip of armed conflict. In Burkina Faso alone, at least 150 Christians were killed and more than 100 churches or public Christian properties were destroyed or closed due to militant Islamist activities over the reporting period.

The three countries on this year's list scoring the maximum for violence are all in sub-Saharan Africa: Sudan, Nigeria and Mali. Sub-Saharan countries account for 12 of the 20 highest scores for violence.

The 14 sub-Saharan African countries on the 2026 World Watch List top 50 include more than 721 million people, nearly half of whom identify as Christian. One in every eight Christians globally lives in these 14 countries. Not all of those Christians live in regions directly affected by high levels of persecution and discrimination, but none is fully insulated from the impact of these human rights violations.

### CHRISTIANS EXPOSED

Extreme violence is of paramount concern in this region, as shown by our research. Weak governments have left Christians exposed in lawless zones. Armed conflicts are grinding on in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, Central African Republic and Mozambique. Chad is surrounded by conflict spilling over from neighbouring countries, especially Sudan.

Christians in sub-Saharan Africa also face the same complex problems as their fellow-citizens of other faiths: poverty, foreign influence, climate change, ethnic identity, disputes over land and food scarcity. The research behind the World Watch List reveals common threads: a weakened condition of the state, institutions that are collapsing or tightly constricted, and a collapse of the rule of law and basic governance so complete that Christians often have no meaningful legal recourse. All this creates a vacuum that draws in opportunists, mainly armed Islamist militants, who operate with impunity. The widespread challenge to state capacity hinders the ability of governments to defend the rights of their citizens, including the right to FoRB.

**Mali (15)** has reached the maximum violence score in Open Doors' research this year, and our researchers now define the level of persecution in the country as 'extreme'. Christians outside Bamako face acute and persistent threats: intimidation, forced displacement, extortion and repeated attacks on churches and community life. Two major Islamist militant networks, JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, dominate this landscape, enforcing strict religious control and targeting Christian presence across contested regions. Earlier factions such as Ansar Dine remain relevant because of their ideological legacy and their role in shaping the broader insurgency.



In **Niger (26)**, Christians live under a persistent mix of jihadist violence and social pressure, especially in the Tillabéri, Tahoua and Diffa regions. Here, IS-Sahel and JNIM enforce their presence through killings, abductions, village raids, extortion and roadblock interrogations. The 2023 coup and the state's weakened capacity have left large rural zones effectively controlled by armed groups or criminal networks, creating a landscape where Christians move cautiously, speak carefully and worship under the constant awareness that security forces cannot shield them. Violence also increased in **Burkina Faso (16)**.

Alongside violence, Open Doors research also indicates growing pressure on Christian communities in their interaction with national government and justice systems. For example, **Cameroon (37)** saw a sharp increase in pressure on Christians from national and local authorities. This was particularly true during the election campaign, when churches were pushed to align with – or avoid contradicting – the ruling party's ideology and political agenda. This was against a backdrop of violence and pressure from non-state actors already present in the country and was echoed in other countries in the region.

A 2019 peace settlement between 14 armed groups inside the **Central African Republic (22)** collapsed almost immediately, and since then the militant factions have carved up control of the country. The central government has little control outside the capital, Bangui. The militants benefit from the flow of fighters and weapons across Central African Republic (CAR)'s borders with five neighbouring countries also in active conflict. CAR's World Watch List score has increased by nine points since 2021, reflecting the rise in violence and especially the increased pressure on Christian participation in church life and national affairs. Some rebel factions are now aligned with foreign agendas, including calls for an Islamic state, further destabilising the situation in the majority-Christian country.

The **DRC (29)** has endured more than five decades of conflict involving more than 120 militias and armed groups. A major reason for the country's rise on the World Watch List is the emergence of the anti-government Allied Democratic Forces, linked to the Islamic State group since 2018, which has targeted Christian communities in eastern DRC, especially North Kivu, Ituri and parts of South Kivu. An ADF attack

on Christian worshippers at a midnight vigil in Komanda in July 2025 killed at least 38 people. Fast-growing Baptist and Pentecostal churches are easy targets, and Christians wearing crosses or other religious symbols risk being killed on sight. A resurgence of the M23 rebel group has only worsened conditions. M23 territorial gains around the border city of Goma in 2024–2025 have exacerbated instability for Christians.



A church destroyed by an Islamist militant attack

**Mozambique (39)** has endured a violent insurgency in its northern Cabo Delgado province since October 2017. This is led by the Islamic State-affiliated al-Sunnah wa Jama'ah, also known as Islamic State-Mozambique, which has explicitly targeted Christian communities. In July 2025, extremists entered Intutupue village and beheaded five Christians, accusing them of refusing to submit to jihadist rule. The attackers declared the killings a warning to other Christian communities in Cabo Delgado. The militant presence is less concentrated in central Mozambique, but spillover violence and radicalisation from Cabo Delgado have begun to affect Christian communities in isolated rural areas.

# STRIKING AT CHRISTIAN LEADERS

## Latin America

Persecution goes beyond indiscriminate violence. Targeted attacks on religious leaders can have a great impact on the morale and even the viability of Christian communities. It is a form of persecution reported across Latin American countries on the World Watch List.

### RISING AUTHORITARIANISM

**Cuba (24)** remains the highest-ranking Latin American country on the World Watch List top 50. During the 2026 reporting period, persistent acts of hostility targeted Christians who, based on their faith, hold dissenting views. Church leaders and members of non-affiliated churches are particularly vulnerable. Likewise, in **Nicaragua (32)** the Ortega regime has increased its targeting of Christians who refuse to demonstrate political loyalty. This reflects an intensifying pattern of pressure aimed at silencing dissent, which encourages self-censorship among church leaders and members.

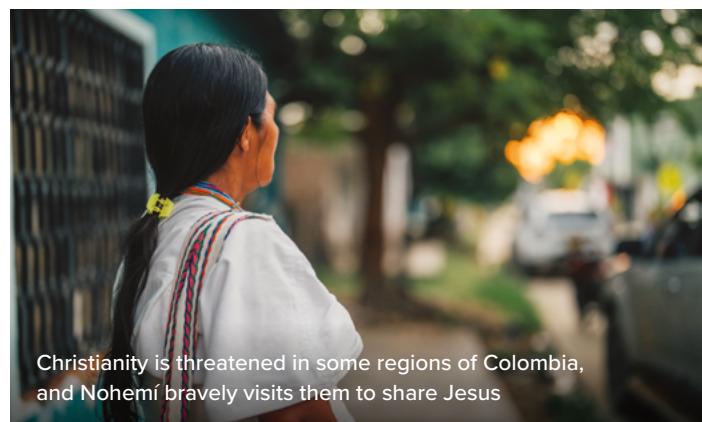
A recent report from the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) cites Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela as part of an ‘authoritarian triad’ where church leaders in particular are vulnerable to attack. It describes how “Each country applies pressure to religious entities and leaders perceived as politically threatening or otherwise misaligned with state interests. This persecution often occurs in response to religiously motivated activity, such as public calls for the protection of human dignity or the provision of community services and support.”<sup>10</sup>

No Latin American country is on the FCDO’s FoRB strategy list of priority countries. Yet, the UK has recognised human rights abuses in Nicaragua and Cuba, with the foreign secretary writing a letter of support to Pastor Lorenzo, a Christian leader imprisoned in Cuba.<sup>11</sup> We encourage the UK government to continue raising FoRB violations in Latin America, and to find new ways of working with faith leaders and recognising their role as human rights defenders in contexts of persecution.

### VIOLENCE IN COLOMBIA

Attacks on religious leaders do not simply come from authoritarian regimes. In **Colombia (47)**, criminal groups continue to control large parts of the national territory and, during the reporting period, violence further intensified.

On 2 July 2025, the bodies of eight people – seven of them Christians, including religious and community leaders – were discovered in a mass grave in Guaviare, a jungle region in Colombia. The victims had disappeared in April and had been interrogated and executed by an armed dissident group, on the false charge of collaboration with rival militants.<sup>12</sup>



Christianity is threatened in some regions of Colombia, and Nohemí bravely visits them to share Jesus

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has condemned the killings: “The stigmatization and targeting of community and social leaders fuels the armed conflict and silences essential voices in the defence of human rights.” The UN has urged the Colombian government to take ‘all possible measures’ to stop these types of violations.

<sup>10</sup> USCIRF, 2025, ‘Issue Update: Repression of Religious Freedom in Latin America’s Authoritarian Triad - Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela’, November 2025.

<sup>11</sup> UK government, 2024, ‘UK Foreign Secretary backs human rights defenders on Human Rights Day’, press release, 11 December 2024.

<sup>12</sup> BBC, 2025, ‘Missing Colombian social leaders “killed by rebels”, prosecutor says’, Vanessa Buschschlütter, 2 July 2025.

The murders highlight the ongoing risks faced by those in local leadership roles across Colombia. Armed groups not only restrict religious activities but also persecute and threaten Christian leaders who do not align with them. Due to their integral role in their communities, many religious leaders can be considered human rights defenders. Armed groups, however, often operate under a logic of 'criminal paranoia', in which any community

leadership can be perceived as a threat. In disputed territories, religious leaders may be mistaken for political figures or agents of the state.

Between 2023 and 2025, at least 36 Christian leaders were murdered and 18 disappeared across different parts of Colombia, according to Open Doors research. Most of these cases have gone unreported in the public sphere.

### CASE STUDY: PASTORA, NICARAGUA

Pastora\*, her husband and their three children were forced to flee Nicaragua after her husband spent over nine months in prison, and she received threats of arrest. Now in exile, she shares her story.

Pastora met and married Roberto\*, the pastor of her church, and together they began leading and preaching across Nicaragua. But the growing impact of their ministry drew unwanted attention. "One day I got a call: 'Tell the pastor to be careful – they're after him,'" Pastora says. At first, the warning felt surreal. Then it came again. And she knew: persecution had reached them.

Soon, she heard that Roberto had been detained. The charge was money laundering. But everyone knew it was a lie. "I broke down. I started crying. I felt like vomiting," Pastora recalls. She rushed to the police station looking for answers, but no one would tell her anything. "The hardest part was telling my children. They asked about their dad every day. They cried, wanting to see him, to talk to him – but they couldn't." She visited the station daily. Still, no information. "I never spoke to him that whole time," Pastora says. "We didn't know where he was or how he was doing. They wouldn't even allow us to bring him a toothbrush or clean clothes."

She stood before the church to share the news and stepped into leadership, broken but determined. "The authorities probably thought we were gathering for something subversive, even though we had permits," she recalls.

After nine months of silence, a call came: her husband had been released. But it was bittersweet. He had been exiled and deported to a neighbouring country. "He got out of prison, but he couldn't come back to us," Pastora says. "And that hurt... it hurt deeply." When the family saw Roberto on a video call, he was unrecognisable. "He was so thin... he had lost more than 70 pounds."

The joy of her husband's release was short-lived. A new threat loomed: the regime wanted to silence her, too. Her husband warned her to flee. Pastora was devastated. She didn't want to leave her home, her church, her people. However, she decided that this was the only option. That very night, Pastora fled, crossing the border with her children. Now, they live in a new land free from oppression but still carrying the scars of persecution. Roberto now preaches in a local church, and Pastora serves alongside him.



Roberto, a pastor and evangelist, and his family had to flee Nicaragua amid escalating religious persecution

# STRIKING AT THE VULNERABLE

## Recent converts

Recent converts are often specifically targeted, as they are vulnerable to pressure to return to their original faith. Converts are often denied legal recognition and suffer persecution and discrimination. This is in violation of their right under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to change their religion or belief.

Both the case studies we describe in these pages are women who are persecuted as converts to Christianity. Open Doors research indicates that persecution affects men and women in different ways. Women converts are often particularly targeted for persecution and hostility in a domestic or familial context, so it can often be hidden. Tactics such as forced marriage or abuse can be used against them to pressure them to renounce their new faith. Open Doors has even received reports, from Central Asia and from the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region, of women converts being told that their conversion is a sign of mental illness, and being forcibly admitted to psychiatric hospitals, or confined at home.

India's Freedom of Religion Acts or 'anti-conversion' laws have been enacted in 12 states, intended to regulate religious conversion from Hinduism. Increasingly, the law is being used to prosecute the Christian minority. In 2025, Jose and Sheeja



Worship in an Indian church

### GROWING INTOLERANCE

In **India (12)**, the 2026 World Watch List reporting period saw increased pressure on individual Christians and families across the country. There has been a shift in the culture due to the Hindutva movement which believes all Indians should be Hindus. Christians are framed as betraying their country and community. This makes even the quiet practice of faith risky, and causes particular problems for Christian converts.

Pappachan were fined and sentenced to five years in prison – the first Christians convicted under Uttar Pradesh's increasingly strict anti-conversion law.<sup>13</sup>

It is a welcome step that the UK has placed India on its list of ten priority countries in its FoRB strategy. We urge the UK government to continue using every opportunity to raise the right to freedom of religion or belief with the Indian government, highlighting FoRB violations empowered by India's anti-conversion laws.

<sup>13</sup> UCA News, 2025, ['Indian court jails first Christians under anti-conversion law'](#), 23 January 2025.

### CASE STUDY: KAVERI, INDIA

Kaveri\* is from a small village in Karnataka State in south west India. She converted to Christianity along with her children after her husband left. Kaveri began a prayer group in her home, where around 20 women gathered twice a week. However, word of the gathering spread, and some villagers became suspicious and began monitoring her activities. Eventually, a group of Hindutva extremists from the village reported her to the police, falsely accusing her of converting women.

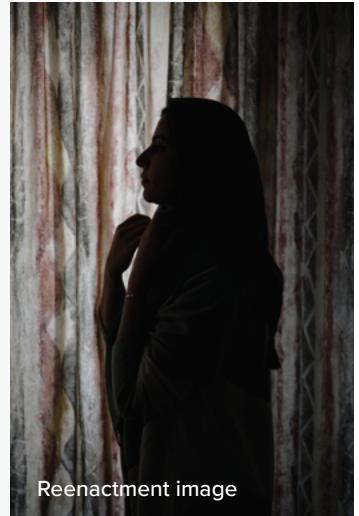
“When the police came [to my house] and asked me to come to the station, I was shocked,” Kaveri says. “Villagers stood outside, watching, but no one supported me. I tried to explain myself, but no one listened.” A local pastor spoke with the police officials, made several calls, and after hours of negotiation, Kaveri returned home around one o’clock in the morning.

After the incident, the prayer gatherings stopped. Kaveri then started a small garment business, but the same extremists accused her of spreading Christian literature. Under intense opposition, she had to shut down her business and relocate with her two children. Open Doors partners supported Kaveri so she could start a new garment shop, and provided sewing machines to run a sewing centre for women.

### CASE STUDY: SHIMA, IRAN

Shima grew up in **Iran (10)**, and became a Christian, along with her mother and younger sister, when she saw the impact on her father, who had converted while in a drug rehabilitation centre. The family began attending a house church; the only option in Iran, where official Christian gatherings for converts are banned.

However, one night, six men from Iranian intelligence broke into Shima’s house. “They never even rang the bell,” Shima says. “They just crashed in.” Shima and her mother quickly jumped out of bed, but her younger sister stayed asleep. “They searched everything. They took our books, our phones, our laptops, even my USB stick that had sensitive work information. I begged them to spare my work equipment. It was right before Nowruz [the Persian New Year], and I was working in finance for a firm. My boss had trusted me with everything... But they didn’t care. They took it all.”



Reenactment image

The consequences were devastating. “My employer, who lived outside Iran, had left the business’s finances for me to handle, but when I no longer had access, and the financial system was inaccessible, I was forced to resign,” Shima says. Meanwhile, she was in her final term at university, just a few exams away from graduating. Her course registration was online and linked to each student’s personal email and mobile. With her phone confiscated, she went to the university in person to register manually. But they refused. “They told me that I had no choice but to register through my own phone and email address. Even though I had already paid my tuition, they refused to let me complete the process. Time ran out, and I missed my exams. And just like that, my education journey was over.”

Shima’s father was arrested, and then Shima herself was interrogated for over five hours a few weeks later. “I remember one of the officers looked at me and said: ‘I actually feel sorry for you. You’ve ruined your life. You’ll never get married now. No job. No degree. You’ve got no future in this country.’” The interrogators weren’t just trying to intimidate: they wanted names, addresses and the strategy behind church meetings. They wanted to dismantle the growing house church movement.

# CLOSING THE CHURCH

## Attacks on peaceful assembly

Persecution can also take the form of attacks on the freedom of a Christian church or community to meet publicly. Violent attacks on church buildings or other public Christian properties are regularly reported globally: in the 2026 World Watch List reporting period there were 3,632 such attacks.

However, persecution is often more subtle than this, and violent attacks can be rendered unnecessary simply by denying the church the right to meet. Prominent cases of such state interference can be seen in China's move to close house churches (see pages 24-25). Once again, Algeria is a major concern as Protestant churches remain closed, and further attacks and restrictions on Christian assemblies are reported in neighbouring Morocco and Tunisia.

Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) protects peaceful assemblies wherever they take place. However, Christians around the world often face losing both the right to freedom of religion or belief and the right to peaceful assembly, which itself is also a part of the full manifestation of their faith. Both Algeria and China are priority countries in the UK FoRB strategy, and we urge the UK government to speak out in favour of the right to peaceful assembly for Christians and other religious groups worldwide.

### CHURCHES SEALED

The decline in religious freedom for Christians in **Algeria (20)** continued in 2025 and the pressure has reached alarming levels. The wave of church closures that began in 2018 has continued. Reports of violence decreased in the 2026 World Watch List reporting period, mainly because all Algerian Protestant churches had already been prevented from meeting in previous years, so no new closures occurred.

On 18 April 2025, police raided a Protestant church in Béjaïa, in northern Algeria, where a group of ten Christians, including two couples, were gathered. The search was conducted without a warrant issued by the public prosecutor, which is illegal.

These Christians had their mobile phones confiscated before they were taken in police vans to the city's police station for questioning. They were detained from 1pm until almost 10pm. At the station, the ten Christians (including two



women) were photographed and fingerprinted as though they were criminals. The church was sealed up (meaning the doors were barred and a notice was posted saying the church was closed) the same day, while the arrested Christians were released after signing an official statement.

This case is particularly notable because the church was one of the few not already closed by the authorities – although in 2022, its leaders had been ordered to cease all worship activities, including services, which they had complied with. “We explained to the police that our presence in the church that day was simply to check on the premises and do some cleaning,” they said.

### **SWORD OF DAMOCLES**

It has been nearly 20 years since Ordinance No. 06-03, regulating the practice of non-Muslim religions, including Christianity, was issued in Algeria. But in practice, this legal framework has gone beyond regulation to become a tool of persecution, leading to the closure or sealing of nearly all Christian places of worship.

“This law is a sword of Damocles hanging over our heads,” said one church leader. The ordinance, which sets conditions and rules for non-Muslim worship, severely restricts freedom of religion for Christians. It states that ‘worship may only take place in buildings designated for this purpose, whose use is subject to prior approval by the National Commission for the Exercise of Worship’. However, not a single application for registration submitted by churches has been approved.

On top of this, leaders of the EPA (Protestant Church of Algeria) affirm that this Commission has never convened to approve any application for the registration of an EPA church. In addition, the ordinance includes measures against proselytising: ‘Anyone who incites, coerces or uses means of seduction aimed at converting a Muslim to another religion, or who distributes documents intended to shake the faith of a Muslim, shall be punished with imprisonment from two to five years and a fine of 500,000 to 1,000,000 dinars [£2,880-5,760].’ This ambiguous law is a constant threat to Christians.

Alongside the EPA church closures, more than 40 in total, there have been a series of trials involving pastors and church leaders. Among the 54 individuals prosecuted, mainly for ‘practising

non-Muslim worship without authorisation’, is Pastor Youssef Ourahmane, vice president of the EPA. He was accused of organising an unauthorised religious gathering and holding worship in a building where religious activities were prohibited. He was sentenced to one year in prison and given a fine of 100,000 dinars (about £575). Pastor Ourahmane appealed to the Supreme Court, which has yet to deliver its verdict. “The 2006 Ordinance No. 06-03, which sets conditions and rules for non-Muslim worship, is being used by Algerian courts to pressure the Christian community and wear down church leaders,” he told Open Doors.



An Algerian woman in a crowd

### **CHRISTIANS SENTENCED**

Furthermore, five other Christians – who are all members of the council of the village church of Tizi Ghenif, affiliated with the EPA for more than 15 years – were sentenced on appeal to three years in prison and given a fine of 200,000 DZD (about £1,150). They were accused of ‘practising a religion other than Islam without official authorisation; encouraging Muslims to consider changing their religion; producing, storing and distributing audiovisual content aimed at challenging Muslim beliefs; and collecting donations without the necessary authorisation from the competent authority’. They have appealed to the Supreme Court and are still waiting for their hearing to be scheduled.

While Algeria is an extreme example, the pattern is not unique in the region. In the 2026 reporting period, a greater number of churches in Morocco and Tunisia were forced to stop meeting – especially sub-Saharan African migrant churches. There are also reports of increased monitoring and interrogation of church leaders in Morocco, and arrests of foreign Christians in Tunisia.

# REGIONAL FOCUS: East Africa

East Africa and the Horn of Africa contain several nations close to the top of the World Watch List. Ongoing conflicts, most notably in Sudan but also in Ethiopia, allow Islamist militants and other armed groups to target Christians. The position of these countries on the World Watch List shows the vital importance of a FoRB understanding as the international community engages with the countries in this region.

## SUDAN (4)

Sudanese Christians are caught in the crossfire, targeted by both the Sudanese Army and the opposing Rapid Support Forces (RSF). In the two years that the RSF held the capital, Khartoum, it destroyed the Gereif West Bible School, the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church, the Anglican Cathedral in Khartoum and the Evangelical Church in Omdurman, among other Christian landmarks. The Sudanese Armed Forces drove the RSF out of the capital in March 2025, only to bulldoze a Pentecostal church complex in July. In Khartoum and beyond, hundreds of churches have been damaged, religious gatherings disrupted and faith leaders detained.

Even though other groups in Sudan are also suffering, the position of Christians is uniquely precarious. They are a small minority with no political leverage, no institutional protection and no meaningful recourse when targeted. Their vulnerability deepens in areas where armed factions impose ideological control, treat Christian identity as foreign, or use accusations of conversion as a tool of intimidation or extortion.

## SOMALIA (2)

A resurgent al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda affiliate, is exploiting the fragmentation and tensions between the central government and regional states. This power vacuum has allowed the militant group to reclaim territory, particularly in the south near the Kenyan border, where the risk to Christians is most acute. All registered churches have been closed or destroyed. Converts from Islam are seen as traitors to clan and identity. Christian survival depends on total secrecy.

## ETHIOPIA (36)

Despite a 2022 peace agreement that formally ended Ethiopia's two-year civil war, the root causes remain unresolved. The truce has failed to yield



lasting normalisation, and violence in the Amhara and Oromia regions has intensified. In 2025, armed groups burned, demolished or looted at least 25 churches in those regions. Worshippers were assaulted, religious materials destroyed and entire congregations scattered. Christians were accused of refusing to support the militants. Abductions of Christians have become a persistent and deeply unsettling pattern in the last couple of years, particularly in areas where armed groups operate with impunity.

## ERITREA (5)

In 2025, Eritrean security forces confiscated dozens of Christian-owned properties, including house churches, schools, small businesses and community centres. Congregations were accused of operating illegally or being influenced by foreign agendas. Christians live under a tightly-controlled security state that criminalises unregistered religious activity, detains believers indefinitely without due process, and treats independent Christian expression as a threat to national cohesion.

### CASE STUDY: AWEIS ALI, HORN OF AFRICA

“Somali Christians are among the most extremely persecuted in the world. You could be sitting in a cafeteria, enjoying your meal and somebody could come and attempt to decapitate you, to cut your head off.”

Aweis Ali grew up on the outskirts of Mogadishu, Somalia’s capital. “When I chose to become a Christian, I was cut off,” Aweis says. Somali society is a clan-based system, and being excluded has drastic consequences. “In Somali culture, you are nothing if you are on your own. If you are not connected to your clan in Somali culture, you are weak.”

For seven years, Aweis lived as a Christian by himself. This isolation and the desire to find other Christians led Aweis to risk visiting someone who he had deduced must be a Christian. He was introduced to another believer, a young man called Liban. Little by little their community grew as they looked for others.

“That’s when the persecution started,” Aweis says, and his expression darkens as he remembers this difficult time. One by one the Christians were hunted down and killed. “It was very scary, at least initially. Liban was the first to be killed. He was reporting to work, when he was shot and killed by two gunmen from the radical Islamist group al-Ittihad al-Islamia.” Shockingly, after a couple of years, only two members remained.

The unrelenting violence took a big toll on Aweis. “I’d lost almost all my friends. I couldn’t eat, and I lost so much weight. I couldn’t sleep due to the constant threats.” Whilst recuperating in another country, Aweis was given the opportunity to attend theological college, which offered him some additional support.

As part of a pastoralist culture, many Somali people live beyond Somalia’s borders, as Aweis explains. “The Somali flag has a light blue background and a five-pointed white star on it, each point representing a region of Somalia. We have Somalia, Somaliland, Djibouti, which is mainly a Somali region, Northern Frontier District, which is part of Kenya, and Ogaden, the Somali region of Ethiopia.”

Today, Aweis is a scholar, author, and Bible translator and he continues to work with Somali Christians in the Horn of Africa. He says, “The Somali church is doubly traumatised; we are part of the community that is facing the lawlessness and anarchy of the nation, but we also have the trauma caused by the persecution of our faith.”

Despite the many dangers, Aweis is resolute. “My vision for the Somali church is to become a normal, accepted part of the Somali society... a day when you will not lose your own children or spouse because of your faith. A time when the government will not put you in prison because of your faith.”

However, Aweis’ bold choice to be open with his faith, identity and ministry is not without real risk. “I receive constant threats, regular emails, WhatsApp messages, social media pages about me threatening my life,” he says.

Open Doors seeks to support Christian believers in the Horn of Africa region by providing trauma support and enabling Somali Christians to establish small businesses.



Aweis has repeatedly been threatened with murder for his faith

# THE CHURCH EXPOSED: Syria

Syria has moved up 12 places in the 2026 World Watch List due to an increase in violence against Christians in the country and wider instability. A suicide attack on a Greek Orthodox church in Damascus killed 22 Christians and wounded 63 others. Gunmen have also desecrated graves. The exodus of Christians from Syria continues.

## RESURGENT VIOLENCE

**Syria (6)** has risen to be among the top ten worst offenders for Christian persecution this year, up from 18th position last year; the most dramatic change over the 2026 World Watch List reporting period.

In December 2024, the Assad regime fell, the group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) took control of the government, and the situation for Christians changed dramatically. Despite the hopeful start, with promises of religious freedom in Syria for people of all faiths and none, violence against Christians has reached an extremely high level.

In the 2026 World Watch List reporting period, at least 27 Syrian Christians were killed for faith-related reasons, though the true number is likely to be greater. This, along with other cases of Christians being attacked, explains the sharp rise in the country's violence score in 2026, and Syria's rise on the List.

In the same month as the HTS takeover, in the city of Hama, unidentified gunmen attacked the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, destroying church property and religious symbols, and desecrating the graves in a nearby Christian cemetery. Meanwhile, in Damascus, the Mar Elias Greek Orthodox Church suffered a deadly suicide attack in June 2025, which the Syrian government attributed to an IS cell.

Violence is not the only source of increasing pressure on Christians. The March 2025 interim constitution centralises power in the president and establishes Islamic jurisprudence as the main source of legislation. Yet, at this still-early post-Assad stage, political power remains fragmented, and widespread disorder leaves room for sectarian and militant actors to operate.

## PRESSURE IN THE CITIES

In Syria, Christian populations have been concentrated in big cities and other locations that have been key to the battles for strategic control of the country. Pressure is greatest in Idlib and some other northern zones under the influence of IS cells or the Turkish military, which have controlled some border areas for ten years. For the few Christians who haven't already left these places, fear prevails.

Pressure is also high in Syria's two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, where churches are under constant surveillance and endure bureaucratic delays affecting activities or renovations. Loudspeaker-equipped vehicles roam the Christian neighbourhoods of Damascus, exhorting residents to convert to Islam. Churches have been posted with leaflets demanding conversion or payment of the *jizya* – a tax on non-Muslims to purchase their safety. Meanwhile, in the Kurdish region, authorities closed 14 private Christian schools for refusing a new Kurdish curriculum.

No matter where they live, Christians are vulnerable. The law gives little recognition to Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations, exposing them to significant pressure because of the popular perception that they evangelise



A threat daubed on St Cyrrilos Church reads, "There will be no polytheists left in Syria by God's will. Our meeting is near, you pigs of the cross."

Muslims and are sympathetic to the West. The Orthodox Church is not free of risk either, because of its visibility in the community and its perceived ties to the previous regime.

Many churches are restricting their activities for security reasons, particularly following the attack on Mar Elias Church in Damascus. That assault has led many Christians to stop attending church altogether. The broader threat of further attacks and rising Islamist radicalism has driven believers to hide Christian symbols and avoid any public display of their faith, especially in majority-Islamic areas or at checkpoints.

### GREATER EXPOSURE

However, given the strong historical presence of the church in Syria, its Christians are less able to go underground than Christian communities in other parts of the world where the church is newer. Historical Christian communities – with the Orthodox as the largest, followed by Melkite Catholics – face increasing pressure from both the current regime and extremist groups, as well as wider social hostility. Challenges include bureaucratic delays affecting activities or renovations, constant surveillance and targeted threats against religious leaders and churches. Churches have been subjected to insults, bombings and intimidation.

While this greater exposure has indeed meant a greater number of violent attacks, the past year has also seen a number of cases of misinformation.<sup>14</sup> Unverified footage or attacks on other religious groups in the country have been falsely reported as attacks on Christians. Open Doors has been reporting such cases of misinformation, as have other expert organisations working in the area of FoRB. This shows the importance of governments consulting reputable sources in fast-moving contexts of persecution. We welcome the UK government's decision to place both Syria and Iraq on its list of ten priority countries in its FoRB strategy.



The aftermath of the bombing of St Elias' Church

### IRAQ AND SYRIA POST-IS

It's been more than ten years since so-called Islamic State group arose in eastern Syria and surged unchallenged across northern Iraq. Many thousands of Christians fled into Turkey and into the autonomous Kurdistan region in north east Iraq. As a result, the population of Christians in Syria and Iraq has dropped significantly. Open Doors estimates about 300,000 Christians remain in Syria today, down from 1.1 million in 2015. Their dwindling number leaves them more exposed, particularly in areas where state-provided security is absent.

In **Iraq (18)**, there has been a slight increase in violence against Christians also. Three were killed for faith-related reasons, and at least ten were arrested during the reporting period. Christians face severely limited political representation, holding just 1.5% of seats in parliament. In February 2025, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians called for special voting rights and militia withdrawal to ensure their representation and safety in the Nineveh Plains. Despite calls for electoral reform, Christian political parties continue to struggle to gain seats, which are often co-opted by larger political actors such as the Babylon Movement, an Iran-backed militia claiming Christian representation but largely controlled by Shia forces.

<sup>14</sup> See: Open Doors UK & Ireland, 2025, ['Misleading reports about "slaughter of Christians" could endanger Syrians, says Open Doors expert'](#), 13 March 2025. See also: FoRB in Full, 2025, ['Truth matters: How misinformation and sensationalism undermines support for victims of human rights violations'](#), 6 May 2025.

## CASE STUDY: TRAUMA COUNSELLING SCHOOL, SYRIA

In the midst of war and natural disaster, one of the most effective answers our local partner in Syria has offered is the trauma counselling school it now runs. In the summer of 2025 after two years of study, 27 trainees (seven men and 20 women) from six different Syrian cities graduated from this school. They are now ready to serve as counsellors, helping others along their personal journeys towards healing.

Our local partner worked together with Petra International Counseling School to train a group of counsellors. These graduates will play a vital role in enhancing support within churches. “We hope these counsellors will improve the quality of service provided in churches and share their invaluable knowledge with fellow church volunteers,” the school organiser says.



Syrian believers at a counselling course run by Open Doors local partners

Their training journey was far from easy, marked by significant turbulence and challenges. They faced constantly-changing schedules due to the complex situation in Syria, including the fall of the Assad regime and disruptions caused by the war in Lebanon that made travel even more difficult.

Despite these obstacles, they completed the two-year programme. “We gave them the technical ways to counselling,” one trainer says, “but they all possess the heart of a counsellor who genuinely wants to help others.”

The counselling school has transformed the lives of many trainees, too.

“I was in a hard psychological state after the war and the earthquake,” says one trainee, Judy. “My counsellor helped me overcome this difficult time in my life without any medicine. She accompanied me until I became stronger. The counselling school was a turning point in my life, and I wish to see this turning point in others’ lives also.”

Rodaina, a dentist, applied to the counselling school when her clinic began to set up support groups for patients dealing with the psychological toll of illness and she wanted to know how to help them. “The school helped me gain new skills and information that allowed me to help these women effectively, and I’m truly grateful for that,” Rodaina says.



Participants celebrating the start of the counselling course in Syria

# THE CHURCH CONCEALED

## Afghanistan and Libya

Christians have been driven underground by the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Many have fled the country, but risk forcible repatriation from Pakistan and Iran. Most Christians are from Muslim backgrounds. They face harsh punishments by the authorities.

As noted above, Syrian Christians are particularly vulnerable to attack due to their long-term public presence in the country, and Syria's place on the Watch List has risen. The opposite is the case for other countries on the World Watch List whose rankings have noticeably dropped. This should not be mistaken for an encouraging sign: it is because the Christian community has been driven underground.

serious challenges, particularly in Pakistan. In 2025, about two million Afghans returned from Pakistan and Iran: the majority of these were forced returns.<sup>16</sup>

The situation for women has further deteriorated, with Christian women facing compounded vulnerability to persecution, both for their gender and their faith. Female converts to Christianity face extreme danger: discovery can lead to beatings, house arrest, forced marriage, rape or 'honour' killing. Many Christian women conceal their faith, remaining highly isolated.



Zakie and other Afghan refugees pray together

### AFGHANISTAN (11)

Christians in Afghanistan have gone underground since the Taliban takeover of 2021. Almost all Christians in the country are converts and conversion is punished harshly by the authorities, as well as by families. Given the risk of meeting with other Christians, the church exists only in increasingly fragmented, secretive gatherings, which makes an accurate assessment of the situation difficult.

After Taliban rule was consolidated, the number of Afghans forced to leave the country almost doubled to about ten million.<sup>15</sup> Christians who fled the country, or became Christians while living as refugees, have slightly more freedom but also face

### LIBYA (9)

For Christians in Libya, the horizon remains bleak. Fewer church gatherings were attacked, as ongoing arrests and detentions have forced Christians to operate with extreme caution. The rampant instability, combined with the presence of Islamist groups and armed militias, makes Christians – especially migrants – highly vulnerable to kidnapping and execution. The absence of a unified central government capable of enforcing law and order has created an environment of extreme pressure for Christian believers.

Because of these dangers, Libyan Christians cannot openly practise their faith. Many live as secret Christians, worshipping quietly and alone, fearful of the persecution that might come if their faith were discovered. For this reason, most reports of conversions within Libya remain unpublished, as revealing such details could endanger lives.

<sup>15</sup> The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, 2025, ['Afghan asylum seekers and refugees in the UK'](#), 29 September 2025.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations 2025, ['Afghanistan: Returns of Afghans creating multi-layered human rights crisis'](#), press briefing, 18 July 2025.

# THE UNDERGROUND CHURCH

## North Korea

North Korea remains the most dangerous country in the world to be a Christian. In a nation dominated by political indoctrination, stories are circulated that missionaries poison children or steal their organs. There is zero freedom of religion or belief. To avoid torture, execution or incarceration in labour camps, Christians have been driven underground.

As in recent reporting periods, **North Korea (1)** has once again received the maximum possible score for pressure in every sphere of life. A marginal drop in the country's violence score reflects fewer recorded police raids against Christians or church groups being recorded. But that does not necessarily reflect an improvement in the situation facing Christians in this country where hidden believers must worship in utmost secrecy.

Daily life in North Korea is dominated by government control, political indoctrination and constant surveillance. In cities such as Pyongyang, residents typically come from loyal, privileged backgrounds and live under strict routines. Typical days start with state propaganda broadcasts and include mandatory political meetings, self-criticism sessions and closely monitored work in government offices or factories. Whether in the city or rural areas, North Koreans endure a life shaped by scarcity, surveillance and fear – and yet, even in this repressive environment, people quietly care for their families, share what little they have, and find small ways to endure.

Hoeryong; a town used for propaganda purposes in northern North Korea

media depicting American missionaries poisoning children or stealing their organs – fabricated horror stories meant to stir up fear and hatred.



A street scene in Namyang, a border town in northern North Korea

As a result, most people grow up without ever hearing basic Christian terms such as 'Jesus' or 'Bible'. Many, especially those loyal to the regime, truly believe the propaganda and view Christians as enemies. Others remain indifferent or cautious. In a society built on fear and survival, even those who don't care about Christians might still betray them, because reporting a Christian to the authorities can result in rewards such as food, favour or social advancement.

And yet, not all North Koreans believe the propaganda. In border regions, smuggled media and contact with outsiders have opened some minds. More remarkably, some North Koreans have become Christians. Though deeply secret and often isolated, their underground faith persists.

### THOSE WHO FLEE

Some seek to escape North Korea. However, if North Korean defectors are sent back by neighbouring countries, they face extremely harsh and often brutal consequences. The regime views defection as a serious crime. Any North Korean caught leaving or outside the country is typically

### ANTI-CHRISTIAN PROPAGANDA

From early childhood, citizens are fed propaganda that portrays Christianity as dangerous, foreign and evil. Tales are circulated in schools and state

arrested and subjected to severe punishment, such as imprisonment in political or labour camps, torture, forced labour and sometimes execution. For women, the punishments can be especially severe.

During interrogation, North Korean officials ask prisoners whom they talked to outside the country, if they had contact with anyone and if they encountered Christians. This means Christians caught by authorities face an even harsher fate. They are often transferred directly to political labour camps without trial, where they have no chance of release and effectively disappear from the outside world.

Even those who avoid capture endure constant risks, including exploitation, human trafficking and abuse while struggling to find shelter and meet basic needs. This is especially true for women and children. Some of the North Koreans we serve stay out of their home country long term; others plan to go back to support their families.

### THE UNDERGROUND CHURCH

Christians in North Korea cannot gather openly, worship freely or read the Bible without putting their lives at serious risk. Because public worship

#### CASE STUDY: EVANGELIST CHO

When a North Korean manages to cross the country's border, it doesn't mean they're safe. Even after they trudge through a river – freezing cold in the winter, sometimes raging in the rainy summer season – and dodge the guards patrolling the riverbanks, North Koreans still haven't escaped danger. They keep walking into the forests, trees and foliage growing denser as they continue. Then the mountains begin. And each step carries more danger: if caught, they risk being sent back to North Korea.

For Christians such as Evangelist Cho, following the calling to help North Koreans also comes with a risk. If Chinese citizens are caught helping a North Korean escapee, they can face fines or even arrest. But that didn't stop Cho.

Open Doors partners such as Cho offer a vital lifeline to these North Koreans. They can regain their strength and continue on to freedom via difficult escape routes through the jungles of Myanmar and Laos, or risk the dangerous trek through the Gobi desert to Mongolia.

Evangelist Cho died recently. But his ministry is still bearing fruit and there are many other Open Doors local workers like him who continue the work with North Koreans outside the country. Open Doors estimates there are up to 400,000 secret Christians in North Korea.

is impossible, believers meet in secret, in very small and trusted groups – sometimes only within a family. When a Bible is available, it is hidden – sometimes buried underground – and brought out occasionally so that people can read and memorise portions before it is hidden again. Possessing a Bible is considered a capital offence, so memorisation is a vital part of Christian life.

Some North Koreans secretly listen to Christian radio broadcasts that are aired during the night. These programmes, produced by Open Doors and others, provide biblical teaching and encouragement. But accessing them requires a modified radio. These are illegal and pose another serious risk.



North Korean defectors praying together at a safe house run by Open Doors secret fieldworkers

# CHINA

## The next generation of secret believers

China has seen its total persecution score in the 2026 World Watch List increase by one point, mainly due to new regulations, which are being strictly implemented. These add to a string of rules imposed from 2018 onwards, with even more promised from next year. The latest restrictions concern the online activities of foreigners and church leaders, especially on social media.

### 'DANGEROUS FOR MINORS'

The future of Christianity in **China (17)** faces a critical generational crisis. In recent years, the Chinese government has intensified its control on religious exposure or affiliation for individuals under the age of 18. Roughly 224 million people in China are minors under the age of 18.

Local regulations prohibit minors from affiliating with or participating in any religion-related activities, 'to help them establish a correct worldview, outlook on life, and system of values and form a healthy mind'.<sup>17</sup>

In places under government regulation, such as the Three-Self registered churches, Sunday school classes for children and young people have been officially suspended. In some areas, young people are entirely prohibited from entering church premises. Surveillance cameras are widely installed in most of the Three-Self churches nationwide, and plainclothes police occasionally come to inspect.

Because of these targeted restrictions, Christian parents and youth workers face the risk of being reprimanded, interrogated, fined or arrested as they inform, influence and raise children and youth in the Christian faith.

Although such prohibition is not stipulated outright in the Constitution or in the revised Regulations on Religious Affairs (2017), the practice is rigorously observed across the country. Greater restrictions and heavy consequences usually apply among Protestants, Catholics, Muslim Uyghurs and Tibetan Buddhists.<sup>18</sup>

House churches, which are considered illegal, face even harsher scrutiny. Authorities have increasingly focused on curbing unauthorised youth religious activities in recent years. If a location is reported and found to host youth programmes (such as Sunday schools and summer camps), evidence such as children's books, chairs or tables may be used to justify allegations of illegal gatherings. Organisers and youth workers risk further surveillance and persecution.



Young believers read the Bible together in China

### 'RELIGION AS SUPERSTITION'

Many schools have explicit regulations prohibiting any religious activities on campus. Some students at the secondary and university levels have reported receiving guidance from the school authorities through their parents, discouraging their children from attending any religious activities. Some have been required to fill out surveys about religion, and some teachers warn students against attending religious activities on Sundays and holidays. Under the context of atheistic ideology, religion is often framed as superstition.

<sup>17</sup> Bitter Winter, 2019, '[Bans on minors' religious activities enforced throughout China](#)', 25 October 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Pew Research Center, 2023, '[Government policy toward religion in the People's Republic of China – a brief history](#)', 30 August 2023.



University students attending student fellowships risk being reported for regulation violations, which can result in warnings, disciplinary actions, penalties or even expulsion. University teachers have also been warned not to share religion

with students and not to bring religion into their teaching or student activities.

Over the years, Open Doors has built strong, trustworthy relationships with several local partners from the Chinese churches. We offer persecution survival trainings to help youth ministry workers. We also provide them with training in relevant legal knowledge when they are facing persecution.

As China features as a priority country in the FCDO's FoRB strategy, it is vital for the UK and others to advocate for all Chinese citizens, including children and young people, to have their right to FoRB fully respected.

#### **CASE STUDY: MINGFAN**

Mingfan\* was raised in a small village in central China. After coming to faith, his family opened their home as a tiny gathering place for Christians in the village. As a child, Mingfan went to church with his parents. At 15, his parents sent him to an underground Christian school in south west China, unaware of the trials he would soon face.

A few months later, the school was accused of being a cult. Teachers were detained for questioning, and the school was forced to relocate. "At the time, I didn't fully grasp how serious it was," Mingfan says. "Only later did I realise how our teachers shielded us, silently bearing the burden."

At 17, the reality of persecution hit hard. Police cars surrounded their school and officers handcuffed and arrested teachers and took them away, leaving the students in shock. "Even now, I remember the fear and tension of that moment," says Mingfan, his voice cracking.

The school attempted to relocate, but was forced to shut down by the authorities. Mingfan later joined a Bible class in west China, but the cycle repeated. Last year, the class was forcibly shut down by local authorities.

Open Doors local partners reached out to the teachers affected and also to students such as Mingfan. After much searching, they helped him find and enrol in a training programme in a southern city; one that suited his needs, allowing him to deepen his studies while gaining practical skills for his future work.

Mingfan has since stepped into the workforce. But his experience has made him keen to work with other young people in China, in spite of the risks.



A youth gathering in China

# BEYOND THE TOP 50

Some countries are surprising for their absence on the World Watch List top 50, given significant media coverage of Christian persecution. Their position on the World Watch List should not be taken to mean that Christians face no persecution or discrimination in these countries.

## ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

The war in Gaza has dominated news headlines since the Hamas terrorist attacks of 7 October 2023. However, neither Israel nor the Palestinian Territories appear in the 2026 World Watch List top 50 countries. The World Watch List records incidents of persecution or discrimination faced by Christians for faith-related reasons. While such incidents are reported to us, most of what Palestinian Christians suffer in Gaza, or the West Bank, is not directly due to their Christian faith, but as a result of the ongoing conflict.

Nonetheless, the Christian community in these lands is highly vulnerable. Open Doors partners report significant numbers of Christians leaving the region. In Bethlehem, where ongoing Christian emigration has already put the viability of the remaining Christian community at risk, tens of families have left since the start of the conflict between Israel and Hamas more than two years ago, according to Open Doors sources. In Taybeh, north of Jerusalem, sources report multiple incidents of violence by Israeli settlers in the most recent year, and that the number of Christians now is 1,250, down from 1,500.

## WAR IN UKRAINE

The war in Ukraine has also been prominent in the news in recent years. Russia and Ukraine both sit outside the 2026 top 50. This does not indicate an absence of concern around FoRB for Christians and others in this conflict, however – only that other contexts of persecution are affecting Christians more directly for faith-related reasons. Open Doors has reported stories of Christians being attacked in the context of the conflict,<sup>19</sup> and Ukraine stands on the list of priority countries on the FCDO's FoRB strategy.

## VIETNAM

The overall persecution score for Vietnam dropped three points in the 2026 World Watch List reporting period, due to a decrease in reported acts of violence, with no killings or church attacks reported. This was sufficient to take the country out of the top 50. Yet, an increase in pressure on Christians was reported this year, in the form of local harassment of converts at family and village levels. Local authorities target non-traditional Protestants and ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands.

The Communist government remains silent on local issues of persecution and continues to control all registered churches and religious activities through its Committee on Religious Affairs. This represents a tactical reduction in overt, violent forms of persecution on the part of the government, which is no doubt concerned about the country's international image. Vietnam is a priority country on the UK government's FoRB strategy, and ongoing scrutiny will be needed.



Ngoc\* and her daughter Mien\* have been persecuted by their communities and abandoned by their husbands

<sup>19</sup> Open Doors UK & Ireland, 2025, '[Russian police invade Baptist churches in occupied Ukraine](#)', 4 September 2025.

# GOOD ADVOCACY NEWS

## Victory for Susanna Koh

On 13 February 2017, Pastor Raymond Koh was abducted in broad daylight while driving his car in a suburb outside the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur. The military-style operation involved a convoy of seven vehicles, including black SUVs with tinted glass and several motorcycles. Up to 15 men took part, some hooded, some wearing masks. The SUVs boxed him in, men in black smashed his windows and dragged him out of his vehicle. The abduction was slick, accomplished and took less than a minute. It was also captured on CCTV. Pastor Raymond has not been seen since.

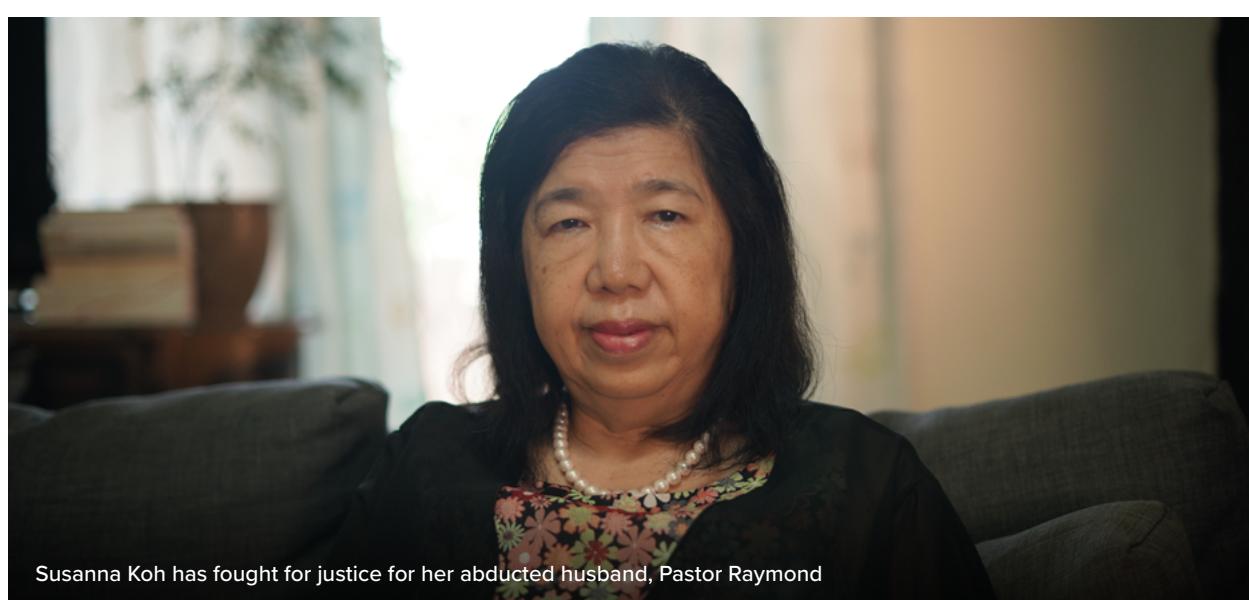
The United States Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) states that Raymond Koh 'was forcibly disappeared for his religious activity and humanitarian work'.<sup>20</sup>

Since her husband's abduction, Susanna and her family have been searching for the truth about his disappearance and for justice. On 11 February 2020, Susanna brought a civil action against the Malaysian government and several senior police officers for their negligence in the investigation set up to find Pastor Raymond.

On 5 November 2025, the Kuala Lumpur High Court concluded that Pastor Koh's abduction was carried out by state agents and held the Malaysian government responsible for his enforced disappearance. The court described the conduct as 'oppressive and arbitrary', ordered fresh investigations, and determined that the state must provide redress to the family.<sup>21</sup>

The court ordered the government to pay RM10,000 per day to Pastor Raymond, starting from 13 February 2017 – the day he was abducted – until he is found. At the time of the judgment, that amounted to RM31.8 million (£5.8 million) and the sum continues to grow. In addition, the court awarded RM3 million to Susanna, and RM250,000 in compensation for the delays and repeated postponements of the case.

This is not the end of the matter. Pastor Raymond has still not been found, and no criminal proceedings have been launched against the state agents involved. However, the court judgment is a hopeful first step.



<sup>20</sup> USCIRF, undated, '[Raymond Koh](#)'.

<sup>21</sup> Malay Mail, 2025, '[High Court orders RM37m payout to Pastor Koh's family over state involvement in abduction](#)', 5 November 2025. 2022

# CONCLUSION

## A challenge to the UK government

The new UK FoRB strategy is a welcome commitment to placing freedom of religion or belief at the centre of UK human rights advocacy, at a time when this is more necessary than ever. Our recommendations in this report reinforce the five strands of the FoRB strategy.

- Extreme violence in sub-Saharan Africa crosses many national borders, and state capacity is proving insufficient to protect the rights of citizens. The UK must work through or with multilateral institutions, including the UN, the African Union and the Commonwealth, to ensure the causes of such violence are properly understood. It must also ensure an adequate response which, in the words of our Arise Africa campaign, stops the violence and starts the healing.
- We support the government's identification of ten priority countries in its FoRB strategy – eight of which rank high on the 2026 World Watch List. This list does not limit UK action but is a hopeful declaration of where the UK has the greatest degree of opportunity. We anticipate seeing how the UK can use its influence bilaterally with countries where there is a strong relationship – advocating for victims of violence in Nigeria and for recent converts in India.
- Open Doors is a member of international networks such as the Council of Experts for the Article 18 Alliance, as well as domestic civil society coalitions such as the APPG on FoRB, and the UK FoRB Forum. We encourage the FCDO to engage meaningfully with these groups, both within the UK and internationally. We also recommend that the FCDO commits to sharing how it stands up for FoRB in the context of its human rights work, for example by reporting on FoRB issues in future versions of the *Human Rights and Democracy Report*.
- In this seventh year since the UK Truro Review into Christian persecution, FoRB cannot be treated as an isolated concern but must be integrated throughout the FCDO's work and

the UK's wider human rights advocacy. We look forward to hearing from the UK government on how this is going to be achieved, building on past achievements following the Truro Review.

- Open Doors has always strongly advocated working with wider civil society and religious groups, both drawing on their expertise in the UK and working with local faith actors and religious human rights defenders around the world.

**We urge the UK government to act on the commitments it has made in the FoRB strategy, and we ask that MPs and peers hold the government accountable for the goals it has set.**

## FCDO FORB STRATEGY

In July 2025, FCDO minister Lord Collins of Highbury and UK Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, David Smith MP, launched the FCDO FoRB strategy. The strategy has five core strands:

1. Engaging with multilateral institutions and forums to maintain collective support for FoRB around the world
2. Achieving better outcomes on FoRB through targeted bilateral relationships – in particular with ten priority countries
3. Strengthening international coalitions of collective action, such as the Article 18 Alliance
4. Weaving support for FORB throughout the government's human rights agenda, ensuring it is mainstreamed throughout the FCDO's work
5. Working towards stronger and wider engagement with human rights champions and civil society, including religious groups.

The ten priority countries are: Afghanistan, Algeria, China, India, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, Ukraine and Vietnam.

# 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 ranking that remains trusted around the world. The reporting period for the World Watch List 2026 was: 1 October 2024 to 30 September 2025.

WWR works with country researchers and their in-country networks to collect 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 overestimate 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.

For each country surveyed, scores for the six categories are designated and then aggregated to determine a score out of one 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."

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.

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.

For more detailed information on the World Watch List methodology, please visit: [opendoorsuk.org/methodology](https://opendoorsuk.org/methodology)

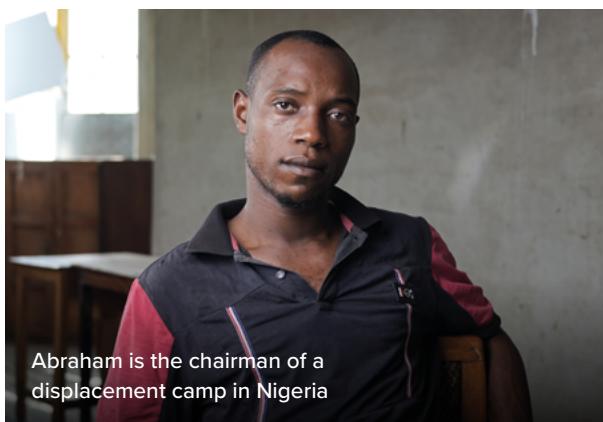
# OPEN DOORS ADVOCACY

Open Doors UK & Ireland is part of a global NGO, operating in more than 70 countries for more than 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.

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. In 2025, we were pleased to welcome Fiona Fearon as our new Head of Advocacy and Public Affairs.

The Open Doors Advocacy team rely on our partners on the ground to give us the latest up-to-date information to ensure 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](mailto:advocacy@opendoorsuk.org)



Abraham is the chairman of a displacement camp in Nigeria

## ARISE AFRICA

**In response to the immense scope of violence and pressure directed at sub-Saharan African Christians because of their faith, Open Doors is partnering with churches across the region to raise global support for the African church.**

The aim of the campaign, *Arise Africa*, is to help the African church persevere through severe persecution and be resilient, resourceful and influential. The four objectives of *Arise Africa* are:

- Every family in sub-Saharan Africa who has been directly affected by violence is supported physically, spiritually and emotionally
- The global church is awakened, united, engaged, actively praying, giving and speaking out about violence in sub-Saharan Africa
- Media are faithfully and repeatedly telling the story of violence against Christians in sub-Saharan Africa
- Governments, international institutions and civil society are acknowledging and taking action to tackle violence against Christians in sub-Saharan Africa.

As part of the campaign, we have launched the *Arise Africa* petition. 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.

At the time of writing, the global petition has more than 413,000 signatures. This year and next, the petition will be presented formally to the EU, the UN, the African Union and governments around the world. To sign the petition, please visit: [opendoorsuk.org/act/arise-africa/africa-petition/](http://opendoorsuk.org/act/arise-africa/africa-petition/)

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## WE URGE THE UK GOVERNMENT TO:

**Promote freedom of religion or belief as a leading priority in foreign policy.** The FoRB strategy makes welcome commitments which would strengthen this aim.

**Work through existing international human rights bodies to highlight the persecution of Christians and other groups on grounds of faith.** For example, the UK should make FoRB-focused recommendations to countries on the World Watch List through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process at the UN Human Rights Council.

**Take every opportunity to raise cases where Christians face violations of their freedom of religion or belief bilaterally with the governments of other countries.** This will be particularly effective where the UK has strong relationships with the country concerned.

## WE URGE THE FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH & DEVELOPMENT OFFICE TO:

**Resource the role of the UK Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief in delivering the commitments in the FoRB strategy.** This should include dedicated staffing and budget within the FCDO, and a larger programming budget that posts can access and make grants in-country for FoRB programming.

**Promote religious literacy training for development staff** to ensure an understanding of how faith identity can increase vulnerability in situations of crisis or conflict, as recommended in the Truro Review.

**Report on FoRB issues as a key topic in any future version of the Human Rights and Democracy Report.** This report has for many years provided valuable insight into UK action on human rights – including FoRB – around the world.

**Investigate flexible funding opportunities in development programming, to build capacity in local faith leaders and Christian-based organisations.** These groups can deliver humanitarian responses, psycho-social care, reconciliation, and community- and peace-building initiatives, and document atrocities.

## WE URGE THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY TO:

**Join global coalitions to promote FoRB, in particular the Article 18 Alliance.**

**Urge governments in Latin America to thoroughly investigate targeted attacks against Christian leaders** and ensure that those responsible are prosecuted and held accountable. The UN Security Council should explicitly and fully recognise that faith leaders are Human Rights Defenders and should acknowledge the essential role they play.

**Advocate against the current extensive misuse of the 'anti-conversion laws' in India**, recommending that the Indian government consider repealing such laws, or reform them to ensure full compatibility with international standards and with the rights recognised in the Constitution of India.

**Urge the Algerian government to uphold the right of Christians to peaceful assembly**, withdrawing all warnings, closure orders and court cases against churches and other places of worship, ensuring the immediate re-opening of all closed churches; and revising relevant legislation in line with international standards.

**Advocate for constitutional reforms that guarantee full and equal citizenship for all Syrian citizens** regardless of religion, ethnicity, or gender, and to urge the Syrian government to (i) prevent continued violence, and (ii) arrest and prosecute those responsible.

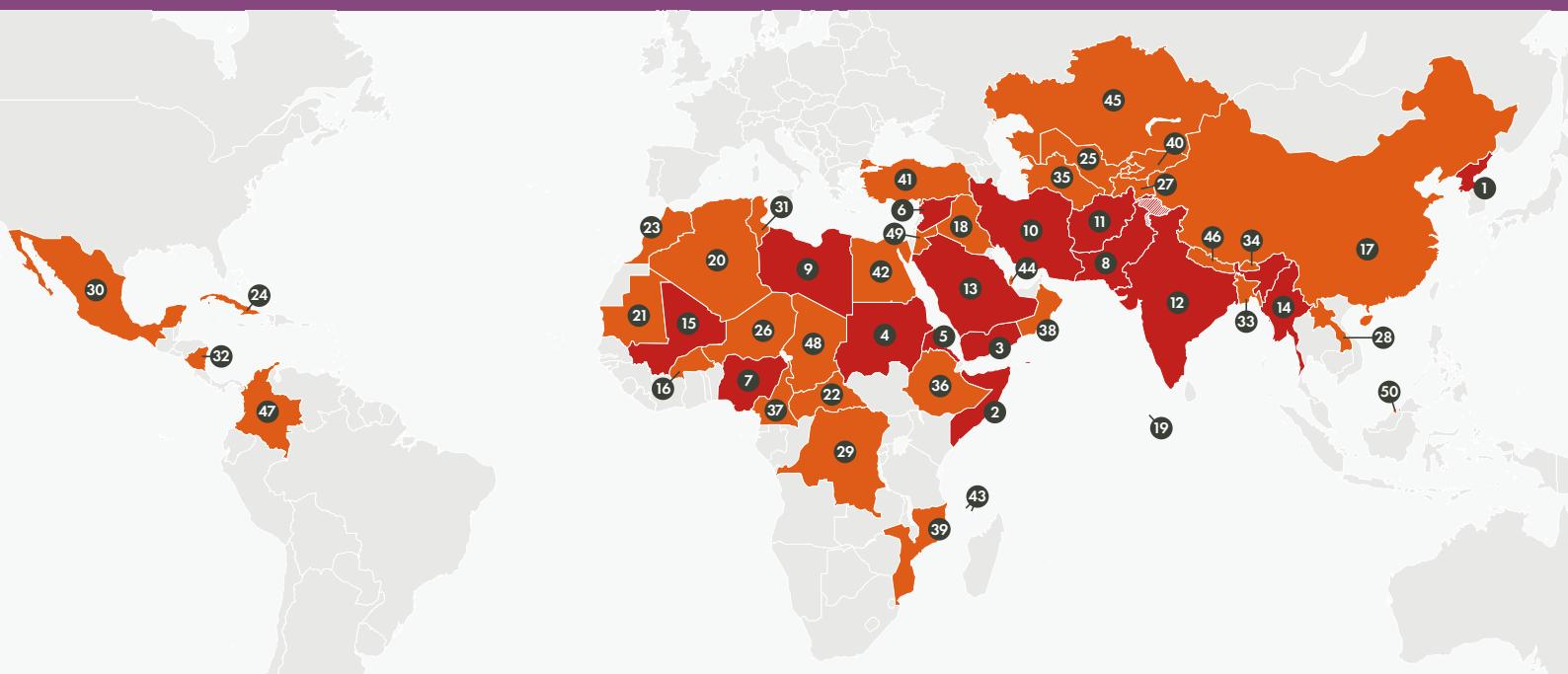
## WE URGE MPS AND PEERS TO:

**Use oral or written questions and parliamentary debates to speak up for persecuted Christians.** This will encourage the government to maintain its commitment to FoRB.

**Join the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief.** This will allow you to make connections with other parliamentarians who prioritise FoRB around the world.

**Contact the Open Doors Advocacy team.** This will help you to keep informed about specific countries and persecution issues and ensure you have accurate information about the persecution of Christians.

# THE 2026 OPEN DOORS WORLD WATCH LIST TOP 50



● EXTREME LEVELS OF PERSECUTION

1 North Korea  
2 Somalia  
3 Yemen  
4 Sudan  
5 Eritrea  
6 Syria  
7 Nigeria  
8 Pakistan  
9 Libya  
10 Iran  
11 Afghanistan  
12 India  
13 Saudi Arabia  
14 Myanmar  
15 Mali  
16 Burkina Faso  
17 China  
18 Iraq  
19 Maldives  
20 Algeria

● VERY HIGH LEVELS OF PERSECUTION

21 Mauritania  
22 Central African Republic  
23 Morocco  
24 Cuba  
25 Uzbekistan  
26 Niger  
27 Tajikistan  
28 Laos  
29 Congo DR (DRC)  
30 Mexico

31 Tunisia  
32 Nicaragua  
33 Bangladesh  
34 Bhutan  
35 Turkmenistan  
36 Ethiopia  
37 Cameroon  
38 Oman  
39 Mozambique  
40 Kyrgyzstan

41 Türkiye  
42 Egypt  
43 Comoros  
44 Qatar  
45 Kazakhstan  
46 Nepal  
47 Colombia  
48 Chad  
49 Jordan  
50 Brunei



## OpenDoors

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