

 Open Doors **WORLD  
WATCH  
LIST 2024**

**THE COST OF COLLAPSE AND  
THE COST OF CONTROL**

ADVOCACY REPORT 2024

Cover image: Pastor Zachariah from Nigeria. Read his story on page 8.

---

# CONTENTS

Introduction	3
The top ten	4
Key findings	5
Key changes	6
Nigeria and West Africa	7
East Africa	9
The cost of collapse: Christians in failed and failing states	11
The consequences of collapse: ten years after IS	13
Collapse in Manipur, India	15
Focus on West Africa	20
China and control: digital persecution	22
Iran: Woman, Life, Freedom	24
Hidden control in Saudi Arabia	26
State control for Christians in Algeria	27
Authoritarian control in Nicaragua	28
Gender-specific religious persecution	29
The persecution of children and youth	31
Stories of resilience	34
Challenge to the UK government	36
Recommendations	37
Open Doors Advocacy	38
Research methodology	39
The 2024 Open Doors World Watch List top 50	40

---

Names marked with \* have been changed for security reasons.

# INTRODUCTION

More than 365 million Christians around the world face high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith in Jesus – that’s one in every seven Christians worldwide. In the top 50 countries covered by this report, 317 million Christians face very high or extreme levels of persecution and discrimination,

Three vignettes from the last 12 months typify some of the trends.

A colleague described driving with armed guards in September through miles and miles of devastation in Benue and Plateau states, ‘the breadbasket’ of Nigeria. She said village after village had been destroyed and was completely abandoned. While they were praying with Christians in one camp for internally displaced people (IDPs), Fulani militants were robbing the crops from the fields just 100 yards away.

***Religiously motivated violence is intensifying as sub-Saharan Africa becomes more unstable.***

In May 2023, tribal conflict broke out in the north-eastern state of Manipur in India. The violence escalated rapidly – 400 churches belonging to both the Kuki and Meitei tribes have been destroyed and 4700 buildings belonging to Christians have been burned to the ground. Seventy thousand Christians have been displaced and many are now living in IDP camps. Open Doors partners sent us verified reports of five Kuki Christian women who were stripped naked, paraded down the street and gang raped by vigilante mobs – two were then murdered. In two instances the police handed the women over to the mob. In the other three instances police stood by and did nothing. ***Violence against religious minorities in India is rising sharply as elections approach.***

In Central Asia in April 2023, one of our partners described a visit he made to a border region. “I was walking through the main marketplace,” he told us, “when I suddenly felt a vice-like grip on my arm and heard a voice in my ear: ‘What are you doing here?’” He replied, “I am here for humanitarian purposes,” and his inquisitor disappeared into the crowd. He was very shaken and explained, “These people can take you off the streets, lock you up for days and interrogate you. Nobody knows where you are.” ***Persecution is intensifying with the rise of authoritarian and autocratic governments.*** China and India account for 10,000 and 2,228 attacks and closures on churches respectively. Nicaragua has jumped 20 places up the World Watch List to number 30 following a government crackdown to suppress criticism from church leaders.

***And yet the church continues to provide hope and practical support.*** Following the civil war in Syria, Open Doors partners worked with church leaders to establish 280 Centres of Hope. When the earthquake hit in early 2023, these centres were ideally placed to comfort and support traumatised communities. Even our partners’ own staff were so fearful of potential aftershocks that they slept with their families in their cars – and drove their cars as close as they could to the churches for protection, practical support and comfort.

The Bishop of Truro’s report in 2019 recommended that the UK should take the lead on promoting freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) globally. We are grateful for the strides taken in this direction and in particular for the work of Fiona Bruce MP as the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy on FoRB and Chair of the International Freedom of Religion or Belief Alliance (IRFBA).

Much remains to be done to support and sustain not just Christians, but all religious minorities across the globe. We have included a series of policy recommendations on page 37. Thank you for reading this report and for all you do to support the persecuted church and uphold freedom of religion or belief – please keep going.



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

# THE TOP TEN

## THE TEN MOST DANGEROUS COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD IN WHICH TO BE A CHRISTIAN IN 2024

---

- 1 North Korea** retains its spot at the top of the 2024 World Watch List. Pressure in all spheres of life for Christians remains at the maximum level. A widely reported arrest of a family of Christians in April 2023 illustrated the extremely high price of being a Christian in the country.
- 2 Somalia** remains at second place this year, and has seen a significant increase in violence, alongside extreme pressure for Christians. Islamic militants have increasingly focused on identifying and eliminating Christian leaders. Even the suspicion of conversion from Islam to Christianity can lead to life-threatening danger.
- 3 Libya** has risen on the 2024 World Watch List due to an increase in violence. This follows a major incident in May 2023 in which several converts from Islam to Christianity and expatriate Christians were arrested. The absence of a single central government to impose law and order in the country has made the situation even more precarious for Christians.
- 4 In Eritrea**, persecution and discrimination towards Christians remains extremely high, with an added increase in violence. While some churches are officially recognised, there is still no sphere of life where the pressure on Christians is not at an extreme level in the country, with persecution by the government being the strongest source of pressure.
- 5** Despite falling two places in the 2024 World Watch List, the situation in **Yemen** is mostly unchanged, with extreme levels of persecution. Yemeni Christians face violations of religious freedom from their family and from the authorities (both official authorities and Houthi rebels acting as local authorities in one third of the country) as well as from radical Islamist groups.
- 6 In Nigeria**, Christians and their communities continue to be attacked in many parts of the country, with the violence score at the maximum level possible. Although 2023 saw the installation of Bola Ahmed Tinubu as president, replacing Muhammadu Buhari, it is as yet unclear what this might mean for freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria.
- 7** Similarly, violence against Christians in **Pakistan** has remained at a very high level, and the extremely high pressure on Christians remains constant. The blasphemy law's high potential to provoke violence was illustrated in the city of Jaranwala in August 2023, where up to 21 churches were burned or damaged and hundreds of Christians were forced to flee their homes.
- 8 In Sudan**, all Christian communities face some form of persecution (especially Christian converts from Islam), and this year there has been a significant increase in violence. The eruption of civil war in April 2023 has left Christians vulnerable, as violent extremists have taken advantage of the chaos to target Christians, seizing churches and Christian properties.
- 9 In Iran**, pressure has remained extreme in virtually all areas of life. There had been some hopeful court rulings in the first half of the 2024 World Watch List reporting period with Christians being released and sentences reduced, but then followed a major wave of arrests in July 2023. Converts from Islam to Christianity face difficulties from the government, society and their families.
- 10 Afghanistan** remains in the top 10. While pressure was at an extreme level in all spheres of life, reports of faith-related acts of violence against Christians were few. The Taliban seemed to be more interested in arresting and interrogating (suspected) Christians in order to identify networks rather than in direct punishment.

# KEY FINDINGS

## VIOLENCE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Using violence to target Christians has long been a key characteristic of persecution in sub-Saharan Africa. Levels of violence have intensified as the region faces more and more instability. Of the 26 sub-Saharan countries with overall scores at or above 'high' levels of persecution, 15 had 'extremely high' scores on 'violence' specifically. A year ago, the number of countries with scores in the 'extremely high' violence tier was 13, indicating the rapid spread of extreme violence across the whole region. In 18 of these 26 countries, 4,606 Christians were killed because of their faith during the 2024 reporting period.

This growing violence is causing a displacement crisis, as more and more Christians and others are forced to flee their homes. Data from the Switzerland-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and the UNHCR indicate that at the end of 2022, 34.5 million people were living as forcibly displaced persons (refugees and IDPs) in the sub-Saharan African countries that have at least 'high' levels of persecution on the World Watch List. Of those 34.5 million, an estimated 16.2 million were Christians.

Violence is defined in Open Doors research as 'the deprivation of physical freedom or as serious bodily or mental harm to Christians or serious damage to their property.' It includes reports of Christians being killed, attacks on communal Christian buildings or Christian homes and businesses, detention without trial, jailing, abduction, rape and sexual harassment, forced marriage, and cases of Christians being evicted or displaced.

## TENSIONS IN INDIA ON THE EVE OF ELECTIONS

The situation for Christians has been worsening rapidly in some parts of **India** and improving in others. However, it is clear that Indian Christians are suffering more violent attacks, raising concerns as we approach the country's elections this year.

In 2022, the World Watch List counted ten Indian Christians who had been killed because of their faith. On the 2023 list, the number was 17. On the 2024 list, it is 160. This increase goes alongside rising attacks on churches, homes or Christian institutions and businesses. Most dramatically, more than 62,000 Indian Christians were forced to leave their homes during the World Watch List 2024 reporting period. That was an exponential jump from 380 on the 2022 list and 834 on the 2023 list. This increase is particularly driven by the attacks on Christians in the context of violence in Manipur.

At the same time, India's Supreme Court is deliberating on whether the country's 'scheduled caste' category, the members of which are widely known as Dalits, should be broadened to include Muslims and Christians. It is a hugely sensitive cultural issue with the potential to trigger large-scale political unrest. India's 2024 general elections will only add to the anxiety.

## GROWING ATTACKS ON CHURCHES

The ten countries where the most churches were attacked in the World Watch List 2024 reporting period were **China, India, Nigeria, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Niger** and **Angola**. Together the number of churches or other public Christian properties attacked or closed down in these countries represented 96% of such incidents recorded by Open Doors for the 78 countries we study. Researchers believe there could be thousands more cases.

By far the largest number of churches closed down by the government can be seen in the so-called 'house churches' in **China**. Meanwhile, the church attacks in India are perpetrated by aggressive mobs, such as in the context of the violence in Manipur State. And although further down the World Watch List, what has been going on in **Algeria** is just as devastating. Of the 46 churches affiliated with the Église Protestante d'Algérie (the Protestant umbrella organisation), only four remained open in 2023. The freedom of Christians to assemble for worship, and the church as an institution which may serve both Christians and the wider community, is increasingly a target for persecutors.

# KEY CHANGES

## GROWING VIOLENCE AND RESTRICTIONS IN NORTH AFRICA

The overall score for **Algeria** has increased significantly this year, and the country has risen from 19 to 15 on the World Watch List. While growing government restrictions have been most prominent – and have been raised by the UK in its global human rights advocacy – cases of violence have also risen sharply. Many churches have been closed or forced to cease all activity, and Christian homes and businesses have been raided. The increasing pressure has forced many Algerian Christians to relocate, both inside and outside the country.

Meanwhile in **Morocco**, which has risen from 29 to 24 this year, Christians with a Muslim background continue to face discrimination and marginalisation. They are not recognised by the government, are closely monitored by the security services, and most often face hostility from (extended) family and society. As in Algeria, incidents of violence have increased in the 2024 World Watch List reporting period.

At the same time, in **Tunisia**, which has risen from 36 to 33, there were more church attacks and arrests than in the previous reporting period. After asserting emergency powers in

2021, President Kais Saied deposed the prime minister, dissolved parliament, sacked judges and launched investigations into political opponents. In 2023 Saied earned international rebuke with a speech, heavy with racial overtones, that accused sub-Saharan Africans of bringing ‘criminality and violence’ to Tunisia. The resulting popular fury fell heavily upon sub-Saharan African Christians in Tunisia, many of whom lost their jobs, while others fled the country.

## STATE OPPRESSION IN LATIN AMERICA

**Nicaragua** continued to deteriorate in the 2024 World Watch List reporting period (rising from 50 on the World Watch List to 30). The deterioration of the rule of law in the country has become more evident through the concentration of state power in the hands of President Ortega and through the manipulation of the legal system. This has made it possible to silence civil society actors who do not align with the ruling party's interests. The harassment of the church has become more direct, with church leaders prosecuted and imprisoned, and church life increasingly restricted. This comes in retaliation for Christian leaders advocating for the vulnerable and calling publicly for the rule of law to be respected.

Likewise, **Cuba** increased from 27 to 22 both due to violent attacks on church buildings and Christian property, and because of regime action to silence dissident voices. Church leaders and Christian activists who have highlighted government human rights abuses or supported protesters have been targeted.

## VIOLENCE IN LAOS

In **Laos**, four Christians were killed during the World Watch List 2024 reporting period, though such killings had not occurred for many years. This caused Laos to rise ten places on the 2024 World Watch List, from 31 to 21. Christians active in evangelism run the risk of deadly opposition. This dramatic change has had a chilling effect on the wider church (e.g., as Christian leaders decide not to travel alone for ministry engagements, but in pairs). In turn, this has restricted Christians in other spheres of life.



On 29 January 2023 in the south-central region of Laos, several believers' homes had been demolished by angry villagers

# NIGERIA AND WEST AFRICA

Countries in West Africa face a complex array of security challenges, from Islamist extremism to widespread criminality. In the face of such violence, fragile government institutions are at risk of collapse, unable to protect basic security. Increasing numbers are fleeing their homes as violent attacks happen with impunity. This has created a displacement crisis as many become internally displaced people or refugees.

So often it is Christians who bear the cost of collapse and fragility in this region. Many of those who have been displaced are Christian, and they face additional discrimination and vulnerability once they have fled their homes, whether in official IDP and refugee camps or while fleeing elsewhere. This instability has been accompanied by an increase in radical Islam in wider society, adding to the pressure on Christian communities already vulnerable to violence.

**Nigeria**, the most populous country in West Africa, stands at number six on the 2024 World Watch List. The country has long been the place where Christians are in greatest danger of being killed or abducted for faith-related reasons. As in the previous year, Nigeria accounted for about nine out of every ten of those religiously motivated killings in Africa's World Watch List countries. The number of killings in these countries is likely to be much higher because in conflict and in the aftermath of conflict it is difficult to get reliable reports on the impact of violence.

Nigeria faces multiple security threats from Islamist extremists in the north of the country, with violence threatening to spread further south. Thousands of members of the Boko Haram group have laid down their weapons, but the group remains active. It is now overshadowed by ISWAP (Islamic State West African Province), which continues to menace Nigeria's northeast and many other parts of the country. Leah Sharibu remains in captivity, having been abducted by ISWAP in February 2018.<sup>1</sup>

Insecurity is also driven by violence in the Middle Belt, where hundreds of thousands have been

displaced. According to Open Doors research, "a decentralised armed group with ethnic ties to the pastoralist Fulani people, the Fulani Ethnic Militia (FEM), attack predominantly Christian villages, abducting, raping and killing people, destroying buildings and harvests or occupying farmlands."

A major consequence of the violence is malnutrition and the threat of famine due to a collapse in agriculture – in 2023 there was a 47% rise in those going hungry.<sup>2</sup> While the violence in the Middle Belt has complex root causes, it has clearly intensified ethnic and religious divisions (see case study on page 8).

In July 2023, the UK Parliament's All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) published a report entitled: *Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide? – Three Years On*. This report was a follow-up to the longer report on Nigeria from the APPG in 2020. Based on evidence from a wide range of organisations, it concluded that FoRB violations had worsened in the intervening years, with religious identity remaining a key motivating factor in the violence, and Christian groups suffering disproportionately.<sup>3</sup> It was argued that religious divisions in the country could be exacerbated by hateful speech from political or religious leaders or by laws against insulting another person's religion, which often led to accusations of blasphemy triggering mob violence. The APPG report also noted evidence that the motives, tactics, and ideology of extremist groups had been adopted by some Fulani militant groups.

The report pointed to a range of other factors contributing to violence in Nigeria, from poverty to existing ethnic tensions to the flow of weapons and insecure borders of the country.<sup>4</sup> However, contributors to the report highlighted how the religious dimension was often obscured or played down by appeal to these other factors, whereas they often exacerbated the impact of religious persecution. In addition, contributors often noted that the Nigerian Government had yet to respond adequately to the security crisis in the country.

<sup>1</sup> [uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/current-rpocs/leah-sharibu](https://uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/current-rpocs/leah-sharibu)

<sup>2</sup> [savethechildren.net/news/worsening-food-crisis-nigeria-farmers-face-wave-attacks-and-kidnappings-armed-groups](https://savethechildren.net/news/worsening-food-crisis-nigeria-farmers-face-wave-attacks-and-kidnappings-armed-groups)

<sup>3</sup> [orfa.africa/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/230901-ORFA-Killings-and-Abductions-in-Nigeria-2019-2022.pdf](https://orfa.africa/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/230901-ORFA-Killings-and-Abductions-in-Nigeria-2019-2022.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [psjuk.org/on-the-brink](https://psjuk.org/on-the-brink)

The report's warnings about Nigeria's future were stark. The report concluded:

*Most of those surveyed believed that the situation in Nigeria had already worsened and would continue to do so. They noted the lost opportunities that had already resulted for Nigeria and the region in terms of development and economic growth. They also raised concerns about the deepening divisions of Nigeria along religious or ethnic lines, evidenced by inflammatory rhetoric and retaliatory attacks. Some even expressed fears for the survival of the Nigerian state; any such collapse would lead to even more people killed or displaced and would clearly be catastrophic for the wider region and continent.*

In early 2024, Nigeria will undergo its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the UN Human Rights Council. This will provide an important opportunity to make recommendations to the Nigerian Government on resolving the security crisis in the country, which could provide relief for the Christians suffering persecution. In Nigeria's previous UPR, the UK made recommendations pertaining to freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria.<sup>5</sup> As the situation for Christians in the country has deteriorated significantly since that time, we urge the UK Government to ensure that FoRB is given prominence in the 2024 UPR process.

**For more on West Africa, go to page 20.**

### **CASE STUDY - NIGERIA**

In May 2023, suspected Fulani militants attacked two communities in the Mangu Local Government area of Plateau State in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. The attacks on mainly Christian communities in Mangu continued with impunity for almost three months.

On the evening of 15 May, Fulani militants stormed Pastor Zachariah's village at around 12:20am. "When I heard about what was happening," he explains, "I tried calling people on the phone, but their lines weren't reachable." Zachariah fled, and when he finally made it back the next morning, he found people salvaging what they could from their homes and fleeing. "When I reached the village that morning, I noticed that the people were trekking in the opposite direction. Most of them were barefoot."

He was not prepared for the destruction he found. "I met those who were injured and saw the bodies of the victims of the attack on the road... all I could see were burnt houses around, including my house which was completely burnt down with everything inside. I searched to see if I could find my wife or children, but I could not find them, so I checked the rooms and went out, only to find their lifeless bodies in the kitchen [hut] outside. I felt devastated," he recalls.

While some continue to label these attacks as merely ethnic clashes between pastoralists and farmers, evidence shows that the violence is heavily and disproportionately affecting Christian farmers.<sup>6</sup> According to Pastor Zachariah, "My own opinion of why I feel we were attacked is firstly because it was their wish for us to be converted to Islam. Secondly, they were thinking that by chasing us out of the community they will have a place to farm and feed their cows."

Open Doors partners have been offering support to the Christians in Mangu. At least 36,683 people, made up of around 3,683 families according to field partners, are displaced in Mangu alone. While the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) has distributed some relief aid, the sheer scale of the displacement has made it impossible to reach everyone.



Pastor Zachariah, Nigeria

<sup>5</sup> [questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-06-26/191189](https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-06-26/191189)

<sup>6</sup> [orfa.africa/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/230901-ORFA-Killings-and-Abductions-in-Nigeria-2019-2022.pdf](https://orfa.africa/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/230901-ORFA-Killings-and-Abductions-in-Nigeria-2019-2022.pdf)



# EAST AFRICA

Jihadist activity in East Africa shows no sign of slowing down. In **Somalia** (now second on the 2024 World Watch List), al-Shabaab suicide attacks have surged despite concerted efforts by Somali security forces and international partners to target their strongholds.<sup>7</sup> Their aim is to cripple security in the country, and to eradicate Christianity from Somalia.<sup>8</sup> In this context, Christians find it almost impossible to meet in the country.

In addition to the jihadist threat, Christians face oppression at the hands of the government. As is the case elsewhere, collapse breeds control as governments become increasingly authoritarian in efforts to hold on to power. **Sudan** now stands at number eight on the 2024 World Watch List. The country's civil war between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) continues with no end in sight. Christians have historically faced significant persecution in Sudan, and while there were signs of hope for a time, the military coup and subsequent civil war have put the church in increasing danger.

Since April 2023, more than 12,000 people have been killed,<sup>9</sup> around 5.3 million people have been internally displaced, with around 1.3 million people crossing into neighbouring countries.<sup>10</sup> There have been reports of crimes against humanity,<sup>11</sup> such as snipers targeting civilians in West Darfur, an act feared to be part of an ethnic cleansing campaign.<sup>12</sup> As tensions continue, there is growing concern that Christians may be targeted disproportionately or suffer as collateral damage in the broader violence. The conflict is also creating opportunities for international terror cells to infiltrate, further destabilising the country.

Others appear to be stoking the war. A report by the *New York Times* revealed that the United

Arab Emirates has been using an airbase in Chad to supply weapons to the RSF in Sudan under the guise of humanitarian aid.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Russia's Wagner group is reportedly actively supporting the Sudanese government.

Churches may also find themselves entangled in internal conflicts, such as in **Ethiopia**, where the number of attacks on churches and public Christian properties such as schools grew sharply. Even if they remain neutral, churches may simply become collateral damage during the conflict – as reported in the war in Tigray.

As a result of the widespread conflict, many in East Africa have fled the region. In October 2023, there were 49,713 refugees and asylum seekers in Libya registered with UNHCR. Of these, just over 50% were from Sudan, and 16.7% were from Eritrea.<sup>14</sup> We know that Christians are among those fleeing. As instability continues, these numbers are likely to increase.

There have long been reports of religious discrimination and persecution within immigration detention centres in **Libya**, and a report by Amnesty International highlighted several cases. For example, a 26-year-old from **Eritrea** who was held in a detention centre in al-Zawiya is quoted as saying: "They hate Christians. If you're a Christian, all I can say is God help you if they find out... If they see a cross or a [religious] tattoo they beat you a lot more."<sup>15</sup> Following a CNN report in November 2017 on slave markets in Libya<sup>16</sup> and a parliamentary e-petition that gathered over 250,000 signatures, the UK committed to provide urgent support not just to migrants in Libya but in countries of origin.

<sup>7</sup> [acleddata.com/2023/10/20/somalia-situation-update-october-2023-al-shabaab-strikes-back-at-local-administrators](https://acleddata.com/2023/10/20/somalia-situation-update-october-2023-al-shabaab-strikes-back-at-local-administrators)

<sup>8</sup> [academic.oup.com/book/35091/chapter-abstract/299149628](https://academic.oup.com/book/35091/chapter-abstract/299149628)

<sup>9</sup> [acleddata.com/2023/12/01/sudan-situation-update-december-2023-unraveling-the-conflict-dynamics-in-darfur](https://acleddata.com/2023/12/01/sudan-situation-update-december-2023-unraveling-the-conflict-dynamics-in-darfur)

<sup>10</sup> [unocha.org/publications/report/sudan/sudan-humanitarian-update-7-december-2023](https://unocha.org/publications/report/sudan/sudan-humanitarian-update-7-december-2023)

<sup>11</sup> [observers.france24.com/en/africa/20230630-sudan-conflict-two-videos-on-tiktok-expose-rape-allegedly-carried-out-by-the-rapid-support-forces](https://observers.france24.com/en/africa/20230630-sudan-conflict-two-videos-on-tiktok-expose-rape-allegedly-carried-out-by-the-rapid-support-forces)

<sup>12</sup> [aljazeera.com/features/2023/6/17/ethnic-cleansing-in-west-darfur](https://aljazeera.com/features/2023/6/17/ethnic-cleansing-in-west-darfur)

<sup>13</sup> [nytimes.com/2023/09/29/world/africa/sudan-war-united-arab-emirates-chad.html](https://nytimes.com/2023/09/29/world/africa/sudan-war-united-arab-emirates-chad.html)

<sup>14</sup> [data.unhcr.org/en/country/lby](https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/lby)

<sup>15</sup> [amnesty.nl/actueel/eu-risks-fuelling-horrific-abuse-of-refugees-and-migrants-in-libya](https://amnesty.nl/actueel/eu-risks-fuelling-horrific-abuse-of-refugees-and-migrants-in-libya)

<sup>16</sup> [edition.cnn.com/2017/11/14/africa/libya-migrant-auctions/index.html](https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/14/africa/libya-migrant-auctions/index.html)



Eritrean Christians praying in secret location

### **CASE STUDY – ERITREA**

Much of the church in Eritrea is hidden but this has not stopped it from growing. However, converting to Christianity in Eritrea comes at a high cost for many. Converts face prison and many other stark realities such as torture, hunger and illness that, without treatment, often lead to death. As Abdullah\* found out.

Abdullah grew up in a traditional Muslim family. Sunni Islam is one of the four recognised religious groups in Eritrea. Abdullah became a Christian and married a Christian woman; together, they had seven children. However, after he spoke about his faith with his colleagues in a government job, one co-worker baited him into making political comments while secretly recording him. The next day, Abdullah was arrested, charged, and sent to prison.

Abdullah spent two years in prison. His wife shared that she was not allowed to bring him any extra clothes and he only received food three times a week. During the two years, he could not see his family but was able to write a letter to his wife detailing his deteriorating health. Only when Abdullah became debilitatingly sick and insisted on medical attention was he taken to the hospital, where he died in 2022. The government alerted those who knew him to tell his wife to retrieve his body. Those close to the family say that Abdullah was imprisoned to discourage his faith.

# THE COST OF COLLAPSE: Christians in failed and failing states

Persecution is a particular risk in fragile or failed states. The *Index of Fragile States*, published by the Fund for Peace, for example, highlights pressures that states experience and when such pressures weaken a state or even push it towards failure. Of the 30 countries at the top of the 2023 index, 18 are also represented in the 2024 World Watch List top 50. When the rule of law fails, Christians often bear the cost of this collapse, as they become vulnerable to violence or are forced to flee their homes.

## YEMEN

The war in Yemen is complex. Since Houthi rebels began to fight against the ruling government in 2014, the conflict has intensified as Iran has supported the Houthis, while Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has armed the government.

The conflict has created chaos, with the country split into zones of control operated by the warring parties. Extremist groups have taken advantage of the instability – including al-Qaeda, which now

controls parts of Yemen. This has increased the danger for Christians, particularly those who live in areas controlled by these groups.

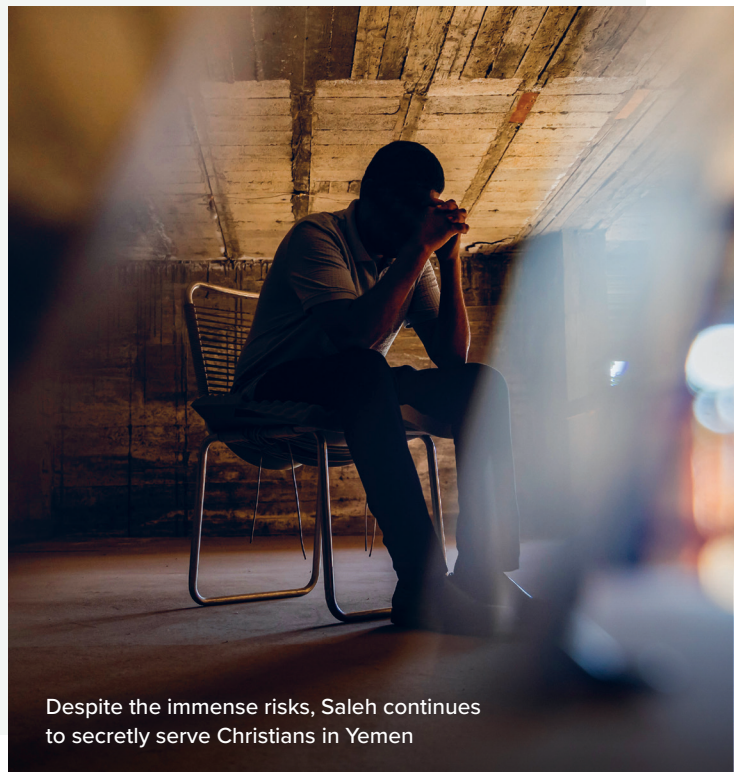
At the same time, the war has created a humanitarian crisis. Basic items like food and medicine are increasingly unaffordable, and the UN's World Food Programme estimates that more than half the country's population is food insecure. This has of course also impacted Christians, as converts from Islam have suffered discrimination in access to aid, which is sometimes distributed through mosques.

The war may be entering a new phase as Saudi Arabia and Iran have normalised their diplomatic relations, and Saudi Arabia is showing signs that it may withdraw from Yemen. However, this could lead to increased instability – and therefore persecution – as the departing regional partners may create a power vacuum that would provide an opening for increased extremist control.

## CASE STUDY - YEMEN

Saleh\* is used to the risk of death for his faith. Because of his Christian ministry, the authorities have offered a reward to anyone who is able to hand him in. Being hunted was nothing new for Saleh. "The authorities have my photo and my name," he explains.

Saleh has not always been on Yemen's most wanted list. He wasn't born into a Christian family. Saleh's interest in Christianity began when he was studying in a city away from his hometown. He was afraid of how his family would respond to his newfound curiosity. But when he mustered up the courage to talk about his interest in Christianity, he discovered his father was already a follower of Christ. His



Despite the immense risks, Saleh continues to secretly serve Christians in Yemen

father had hidden his faith from his son, a common practice in the region, where parents can be endangered if their children disclose any faith outside of Islam. Later that year, Saleh became a Christian himself and a church leader.

Eventually, Saleh had to flee Yemen because of the civil war.

However, Yemen was always in Saleh's heart. He loved his native land – which was now known around the world as a place of profound sadness and despair. Saleh decided to start a house church network in Yemen. Seventy per cent of believers in Yemen do not (or cannot) meet regularly, either for security reasons or because they do not know of other Christians.

Saleh began travelling from his home to Yemen. However, soon he found himself in hiding, getting death threats on his phone. "Extremists make our ministry easier!" he says. "Because of them, people reject and are horrified by what is being done in the name of 'religion.'"

Saleh adds, "The church in Yemen is living in very harsh conditions but is growing nonetheless!" Saleh currently serves about 70 families in Yemen. With the help of Open Doors partners, he can provide meeting spaces for Christians, offer medical help and transportation, give out food packages, conduct baptisms, train leaders, and help set up essential training programmes.

## LIBYA

Christianity in Libya seems impossible. Authorities assert that Libya is a wholly Islamic nation where Islamic law governs how the nation is run and how problems are resolved. This means, in society's eyes, there can be no Christians in Libya – and that's what the authorities want the public to believe.

However, the truth is more complicated. Because most believers in Libya conceal their faith – sometimes for years – the exact number of Christians is not fully known. The biggest risk for a believer is if he or she expresses their faith publicly – particularly if they come from a Muslim background. They would likely be attacked by their

own family and face threats from Islamic militants and the Libyan authorities.

Of the seven million people who make up Libya's population, Open Doors estimates that around 35,000 are Christians. Most of these believers are foreign migrants from Egypt or sub-Saharan Africa, and a few are Libyans who have converted from Islam. But every Christian in Libya experiences intense pressure from his or her family, the state and society.

Christians have always faced persecution in Libya. Muammar Gaddafi, the former dictator who ruled Libya from 1969 until his death in March 2011, persecuted Christians. But when Gaddafi was overthrown and his government ousted, he was simply replaced by others who persecuted Christians. These Islamic extremist militias hunt anyone who fails to conform to their interpretation of Islam. Christians are one of those groups. Significant energy is expended to try to make Christian converts return to Islam, including by the Internal Security Agency of Libya.



The biggest risk to a believer in Libya is if they express their faith publicly. For this reason, many Christians in Libya completely conceal their faith

© Alamy | Image is representative

# THE CONSEQUENCES OF COLLAPSE: ten years after IS

In June 2014, forces of so-called Islamic State (IS) captured the city of Mosul from Iraqi authorities. Pictures soon emerged from the captured city of Christian houses painted with the Arabic letter Nun, identifying them as Christian properties, with further attacks sure to follow. Three thousand Christian families were among the half a million citizens who left Mosul. Later, in August 2014, Islamist extremists captured Qaraqosh, which was then the largest Christian city in Iraq. Some of those displaced by IS still feel unable to return to their homes. As we approach the tenth anniversary of this persecution, Christians in Iraq and Syria not only still live with its devastating consequences but also face new threats.

In **Iraq**, even the meagre piece of political territory held by Christians is increasingly contested, particularly at the hands of a group called the Babylon Movement. Originally a paramilitary group that formed in 2014 to fight the IS invasion of northern Iraq, it has since morphed into a political movement which now holds all five of the seats reserved for Christians in Iraq's 329-seat parliament. This movement now holds all five of the seats reserved for Christians in Iraq's 329-seat parliament. The Babylon Movement is presented as a local Christian force but has in fact been recruited largely from Shia Muslim communities. It has close ties with Iraq's Shia Islamist political party and paramilitary Badr Organization and the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).

In 2023, the Patriarch of Iraq's historic Catholic Chaldean Church spoke out, asserting that the Babylon Movement's practice of associating Christian identity with displays of military force endangers a minority whose presence is already precarious. For its part, the Babylon Movement has accused the bishop of meddling in politics. As a result, Iraq's president withdrew the decree recognising Cardinal Sako's role, and the Patriarch felt compelled to relocate



Refugees receiving food from Mar Elia Chaldean Catholic Church, having fled Mosul and the Nineveh Plains in Iraq, 2014

from Baghdad to Iraqi Kurdistan. Many other Christians in Iraq remain displaced.

Adding to that pressure is a 2023 Iraqi electoral reform law that gives victorious major political parties the power to allocate the few parliamentary seats reserved for ethnic and religious minorities. Church leaders of various denominations urged their church members to boycott the November 2023 parliamentary elections if the representation of Christians and the protection of their interests could not be guaranteed.

Meanwhile, **Türkiye** has continued its military incursions into northern Iraq, where most of Iraq's Christians live, to fight the Kurdistan Workers' Party. The fighting has prevented Christians, who had fled the violence, from returning to their villages. Christians in Iraqi Kurdistan also face other forms of pressure. For example, in March 2023, a Christian church leader from Dohuk faced legal action concerning remarks critical of Islam which were posted online. He and his family were forced to leave the country.<sup>17</sup>

In 2014, the new Iraqi Government, which formed to fight the rise of IS, made pledges to establish an inclusive Iraq.<sup>18</sup> Ten years on, the Christian community still suffers. In the coming years it will be vital for the UK, as a staunch ally of Iraq in the fight against IS, to hold the Iraqi government accountable for its treatment of Christians, building a society which promotes freedom of religion or belief in which all Iraqis can flourish.

In **Syria**, over a decade of civil war has scattered and diminished the Christian presence in the

<sup>17</sup> [opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/articles/stories/Iraq-Bishop-faces-legal-action-for-comments-on-social-media](https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/articles/stories/Iraq-Bishop-faces-legal-action-for-comments-on-social-media)

<sup>18</sup> [atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/pm-haider-al-abadi-a-new-era-in-iraq](https://atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/pm-haider-al-abadi-a-new-era-in-iraq)



[LEFT] Earthquake destruction in Aleppo, Syria in February 2023

[BELOW] Earthquake survivors receiving food aid and shelter in Maronite Church, Latakia, Syria



country. The devastating earthquake in February 2023 made the precarious situation worse. Christians fleeing violence or seeking to live with the country's collapsed economy have been easy targets of violence and Islamist pressure to retreat from public life. Open Doors researchers now define the persecution situation in Syria as 'extreme'.

Militant Islamic opponents of the Assad regime, including elements of the Islamic State group, have demolished, or taken over historical churches, whose leaders are vulnerable to attack or kidnapping. Christians in these areas who haven't been forcibly displaced from their homes have little scope for expressing their faith. Christians have also been caught in the persistent pockets of conflict and, in some cases, are deliberately targeted. In Afrin, for example, Turkish-backed troops are reported to be targeting Kurdish Christians.

As a result of the earthquake, nine out of ten people who had already fled the war's violence at least once to live in displacement camps were displaced yet again.<sup>19</sup> The earthquake 'not only destroyed more homes, schools and places for children to play, they also shattered any sense of safety for so many of the most vulnerable children and families,' according to the Executive Director of UNICEF.<sup>20</sup> Christian children already had been particularly vulnerable to such a shock, as many Christian schools had been closed or damaged because of the war and children have had to attend state-run Islamic schools. To make matters worse, elements of the Islamic State group and others launched attacks in the area just weeks after the earthquake, leaving Christians caught up in conflict once more.

<sup>19</sup> [reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/no-place-displacement-report-multiple-displacement-idps-northwest-syria-due-12-years-conflict-and-february-6ths-earthquakes](https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/no-place-displacement-report-multiple-displacement-idps-northwest-syria-due-12-years-conflict-and-february-6ths-earthquakes)

<sup>20</sup> [unicef.org/press-releases/37-million-children-earthquake-affected-syria-face-catastrophic-combination-threats](https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/37-million-children-earthquake-affected-syria-face-catastrophic-combination-threats)

# COLLAPSE in Manipur, India

For persecuted Christians, the cost of collapse is not confined to failed states. Even in apparently stable countries which nonetheless tolerate violations of freedom of religion or belief, local instability and fragility can have catastrophic consequences for Christians and other religious minorities. A key recent example of this is the situation in Manipur, India.

According to the 2011 census,<sup>21</sup> the Meitei are the largest community in Manipur (53%), while tribes such as the Kuki-Zomis account for almost 40% of the state population. While Meitei are mostly Hindus, the tribal groups are mainly Christians. Manipur has a nearly equal population of Hindus and Christians.<sup>22</sup> Recently, the Meitei have been seeking official tribe status. This was met with opposition from the predominantly Christian Kuki, who argued that bestowing official status on the Meitei would empower the larger and mostly Hindu ethnic group to push into Kuki areas.

**“Attacks on Christian Kuki houses in the city of Imphal were carried out with precision as they were marked with a red circle and cross a few months prior to the conflict.”**

Violence erupted on 3 May 2023,<sup>23</sup> after a Tribal Solidarity March was organised by the All-Tribal Students Union of Manipur to protest the decision by the Manipur High Court to consider giving scheduled tribe status to the Meitei community. Aggressive clashes ensued between the Meitei and Kuki-Zomi (tribal) communities. According to Open Doors partners, rioting mobs have killed more than 148 Christians and injured hundreds more. In addition, nearly 400 churches have been attacked, as well as over 4,700 other Christian properties.

However, attacks have not been limited to one tribal group. More than half of the 400 churches attacked were those of Meitei Christians – 249 of these within

the first 36 hours of rioting. According to Open Doors sources, Meitei Christian church leaders and their families were also attacked by Meitei Hindutva mobs. In many instances, Kuki Christian pastors provided shelter and protection to Meitei Christians. 70,000 Kuki-Zomi tribal Christians and Meitei Christians have been forcibly displaced. They are living in terrible conditions but are afraid to return home.

Particularly horrific has been the situation for Christian women in Manipur. On 19 July, a video of two Kuki women being assaulted went viral online. The incident occurred on 4 May, but only came to light after the partial lifting of an internet ban. The women were dragged from a police van by a mob from a different tribe before being stripped, paraded and sexually assaulted. The younger woman's brother and father were killed trying to protect them. Open Doors researchers have verified five case studies of women being targeted for sexual violence, with the police failing to intervene or protect the women.

There was widespread condemnation of the state and central governments' response to the incident. A Zero First Incident Response (FIR), which is filed against unknown suspects, was initially issued, but the video clearly shows the faces of multiple perpetrators, and until the video went viral, more than two months after the incident occurred, no arrests had been made. Police now say that a case has been opened, and one man has been arrested.

While many have termed this violence as a purely ethnic conflict, the undercurrent of religious intolerance is clear. Attacks on Christian Kuki houses in the city of Imphal were carried out with precision as they were marked with a red circle and cross a few months prior to the conflict by Meitei extremist groups – Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun.<sup>24</sup> A local Open Doors partner reports that, 'members of the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) group have been trying to radicalise the Meitei for many years now.' According to a recent article in the Guardian by Priya Sharma, a young Christian women's activist and human rights researcher: “The

<sup>21</sup> censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/10213

<sup>22</sup> census2011.co.in/data/religion/state/14-manipur.html

<sup>23</sup> news18.com/india/from-tribal-protest-to-shoot-at-sight-order-a-brief-timeline-of-how-manipur-violence-unfolded-7731073.html

<sup>24</sup> newslaundry.com/2023/07/31/empty-handed-desperate-flight-through-forests-kuki-zomis-on-encountering-mobs-fleeing-to-nagaland

truth is that the seeds of violence have been sown over decades... To be a religious minority, a Muslim, or a Christian, or another faith, is to face a volatile, polarised atmosphere.”<sup>25</sup>

## BEYOND MANIPUR

Manipur is not the only part of India where Christians suffer persecution. India is number 11 on the 2024 World Watch List, and mass violence against Christians and Muslims has been reported in other parts of the country – reports include physical assault and torture. In addition, misinformation about the conflict in Manipur is now being used by extremists to convince Hindus that Christians may attack and kill them. This has caused religious resentment and has led to ethnic tension. In 2021, Open Doors published a report in collaboration with researchers from LSE entitled *Destructive Lies*, noting the harmful consequences of such misinformation for both Christian and Muslim minorities.

In the state of Chhattisgarh, Christians faced bias from the government during the outbreaks of violence in addition to the violence itself. This reflects a broader problem in India: the belief that Christians are not truly Indian. “There is a common belief among the general population that if Christians are not kept in check, foreign[ers] will take over,” Priya Sharma says. “This [has led to] religious nationalism, and the belief that self-proclaimed groups ha[ve] the authority to take [the] law in their own hands.”

In this state, certain groups use violent means to enforce ‘Ghar Wapsi’ ceremonies, which literally means ‘homecoming’, but is used to refer to forced reconversion to Hinduism. Sometimes, the government does not have the power to stop these violent groups despite its promises to protect religious minorities.

“Many live in fear of extremist groups,” Sharma shares. “During small gatherings, believers bring their shoes in to avoid drawing attention, as [extremist] groups may invade homes if they see a lot of footwear outside a house. Due to fear of an attack, believers who gather at home also avoid singing together.”

Because of the religious propaganda against Christians and psychological pressure from the government and their communities, many believers succumb to the pressure and reconvert back to Hinduism during the Ghar Wapsi campaigns.

For instance, in July 2023, in the eastern state of Orissa, five families who had been practising Christianity for six years decided to renounce their faith and embrace Hinduism. There are also instances where young girls who recently converted to Christianity have been forced into marriages against their will without any intervention from the state.

Despite such frequent attacks and forced conversions, Christians often face false accusations that they are forcibly converting Hindus. The implementation of anti-conversion laws in some Indian states has led to a hostile and unstable environment, with daily reports of unrest.

One pastor, Prithvi\*, was conducting a church service when a mob of religious extremists came, disrupted the worship, vandalised the church, and attacked him and his wife. When the couple filed a police complaint, the extremists filed a counter case. Because of the extremists’ influence, Prithvi was arrested and imprisoned.

“We were gripped by fear of the mob attack,” Prithvi’s wife remembers. “My husband was falsely accused and imprisoned, yet we love the Lord. We are still under threat and fear, but we continue to serve the Lord secretly. We gather every week at different believers’ houses to avoid another incident.”

Nonetheless, there are also signs of hope in India. Freedom of religion or belief is recognised in the Indian Constitution, and is upheld by many Indian citizens, including those in authority. For example, following the 2023 elections in Karnataka state, the new State Minister Priyank Kharge was quoted as saying, “Many orders and laws enforced under the previous BJP regime such as school textbook revisions and anti-conversion laws were against state interest and will be revised or withdrawn.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> [theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/aug/09/narendra-modi-bjp-india-manipur-violence](https://theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/aug/09/narendra-modi-bjp-india-manipur-violence)

<sup>26</sup> [hindustantimes.com/india-news/bengaluru-karnataka-to-review-and-reverse-controversial-decisions-by-previous-bjp-government-in-de-saffronisation-drive-101684953761222.html](https://hindustantimes.com/india-news/bengaluru-karnataka-to-review-and-reverse-controversial-decisions-by-previous-bjp-government-in-de-saffronisation-drive-101684953761222.html)





A pastor overlooking his destroyed church in Manipur, India



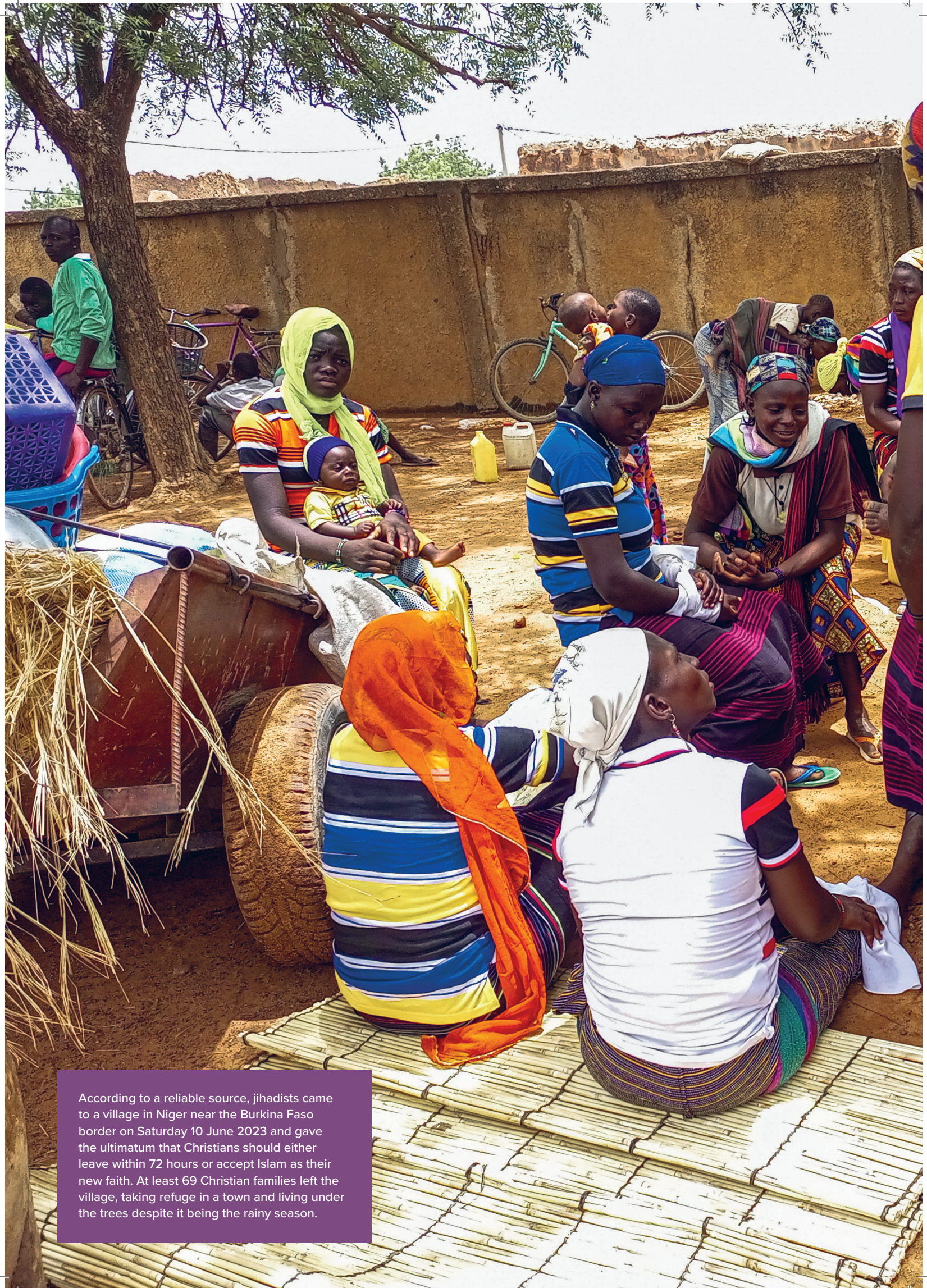
Hindu extremists stormed Pastor Chandra Kumar's\* church. He was beaten and arrested on false charges before eventually being released some weeks later



Bibles burned during the violence in Manipur, India



Anti-Christian rally in Chhattisgarh, India



According to a reliable source, jihadists came to a village in Niger near the Burkina Faso border on Saturday 10 June 2023 and gave the ultimatum that Christians should either leave within 72 hours or accept Islam as their new faith. At least 69 Christian families left the village, taking refuge in a town and living under the trees despite it being the rainy season.



# FOCUS ON WEST AFRICA

In West Africa, fragile institutions vulnerable to corruption have proved unable to prevent the rise of terrorist groups, who, in turn, exploit existing conflict and criminality for their own ends. This has led to a humanitarian crisis in the region, with many killed or displaced. Again, while the violence has affected everyone in the region, Christian communities have proven particularly vulnerable.

In **Burkina Faso** (number 20 on the 2024 World Watch List), levels of insecurity are particularly high in the north and north east of the country, where extremist groups are active. It is estimated that 50% of Burkina Faso's territory is no longer under government control.<sup>27</sup> In addition, while ethnic conflicts are rare in Burkina Faso, the government stands accused of stoking tensions by re-framing the conflict from one based on violent and faith-based extremism to one arising from ethnically-based struggles.<sup>28</sup> There have been attacks on churches, killings and kidnappings of Christians, with many also being displaced.<sup>29</sup>

**Cameroon** (number 43 on the 2024 World Watch List) faces an insurgency by armed separatists in the north and in the south-west, along with pressure from Islamist militants in the poorer northern region of the country. The difficult economic situation and weak governance, compounded by porous borders with corrupt customs and weak security presence, have made the far north of the country particularly vulnerable to the infiltration of Islamist militants like Boko Haram. Christians have been forced to flee their homes in the face of violent attacks and kidnappings.

In **Mali**, the already deteriorating security situation was made more fragile when French troops departed in November 2022, with the UN mission due to depart by the end of 2023, creating more room for jihadist aggression. Human Rights Watch has documented 'widespread killings, rapes, and lootings of villages in northeast Mali' by jihadist militants since January 2023.<sup>30</sup> However, it is worth noting that in June 2023, Malian voters

approved a referendum on the adoption of a new constitution, a move seen as one that could pave the way for the return to civilian rule, and the holding of new elections in 2024. The military government pledged to work towards a return to civilian rule after the Economic Community of West African States lifted a set of trade and financial sanctions. In the new constitution there is clear recognition of the Christian minority in the country.

**Niger** stands at number 27 on the 2024 World Watch List. There has been a surge in targeted attacks (at least 100 in the 2024 reporting period) against Christian institutions such as schools, healthcare facilities and other properties.



Fati\* and her family had to flee their home in Burkina Faso following extremist attacks

<sup>27</sup> [fragilestatesindex.org/2023/05/31/an-elusive-search-for-stability-in-burkina-faso-as-france-takes-a-big-step-back](https://fragilestatesindex.org/2023/05/31/an-elusive-search-for-stability-in-burkina-faso-as-france-takes-a-big-step-back)

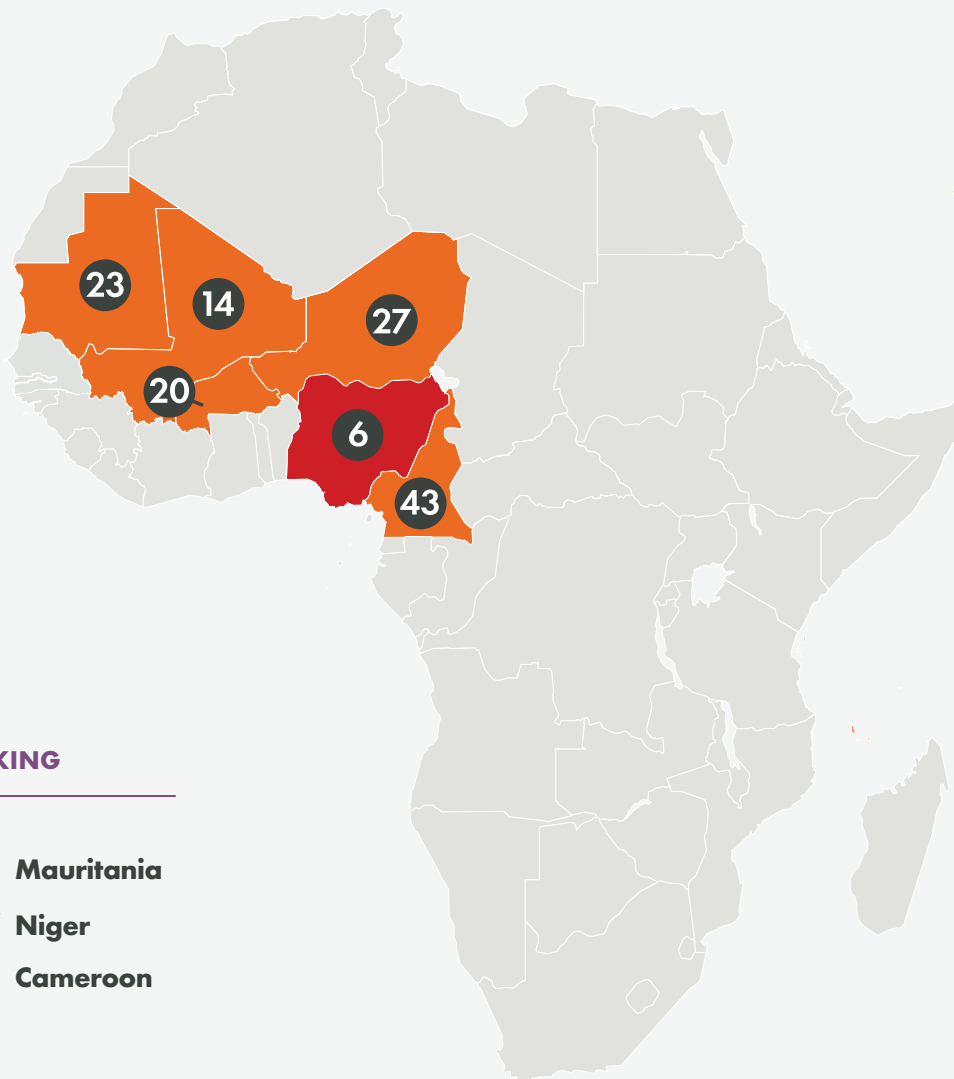
<sup>28</sup> [reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Sahel\\_ViolentExtremismVulnerabilityResilience\\_EN\\_2018.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Sahel_ViolentExtremismVulnerabilityResilience_EN_2018.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> [thetablet.co.uk/news/11844/burkina-faso-bishop-warns-of-elimination-of-christians-in-the-country](https://thetablet.co.uk/news/11844/burkina-faso-bishop-warns-of-elimination-of-christians-in-the-country)

<sup>30</sup> [hrw.org/news/2023/07/13/mali-mounting-islamist-armed-group-killings-rape](https://hrw.org/news/2023/07/13/mali-mounting-islamist-armed-group-killings-rape)

## PERSECUTION LEVELS

- HIGH
- VERY HIGH
- EXTREME



## WORLD WATCH LIST RANKING

- |                        |                      |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| <b>6</b> Nigeria       | <b>23</b> Mauritania |
| <b>14</b> Mali         | <b>27</b> Niger      |
| <b>20</b> Burkina Faso | <b>43</b> Cameroon   |

The volatility in the Sahel region has significantly affected Niger, and the coup in 2023 has positioned Niger at the epicentre of the geopolitical struggle unfolding in the region.

The instability in West Africa has been clearly displayed in recent months – since 2020 there have been six successful coups and two attempts. During the 2024 World Watch List reporting period, coups took place in Gabon (30 August 2023) and Niger (26 July 2023). They are driven by widespread domestic dissatisfaction, Islamist insurgency, the withdrawal of French military involvement in West Africa, and the engagement of proxy private military companies, such as Russia’s Wagner group.

Christians are often especially vulnerable in these situations. Military rule often makes it hard for rights to be enforced equally and flourish, and an illusion of

stability often comes at the cost of suppressed civil liberties and the exacerbation of existing forms of discrimination. Authoritarian rule can also aggravate religious tensions and create fertile ground for radical Islamist ideologies to gain traction.

As security challenges intensify, many Christians in West Africa become IDPs or refugees, finding themselves additionally vulnerable due to their faith as well as their displacement. Many Christians in Nigeria feel unsafe in official refugee camps and take refuge in unofficial Christian camps. Christians may be subject to persecution at any point while displaced.<sup>31</sup> It is vital that the additional vulnerability of Christian refugees and IDPs is recognised and acted on in any response efforts in the region.

<sup>31</sup> [opendoors.org/therefugeereport](https://opendoors.org/therefugeereport)

# CHINA AND CONTROL: digital persecution

China stands at number 19 on the 2024 Open Doors World Watch List. Pressure on Christians in the country has increased due to new regulations limiting churches in their worship or other activities. From September 2023, all state-approved religious organisations have had to follow these stricter regulations, encouraging support for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the sinicisation of China's religions. This includes the insistence that sermons reflect the Core Socialist Values. Churches have also been closed or told to remove crosses and put up Communist emblems and slogans.

**“State action against religious groups often goes together with wider restrictions on free expression and civil society.”**

This goes hand-in-hand with new legislation aiming to introduce mandatory patriotic education in Chinese schools, and reflects a wider push for ideological control which affects all of Chinese society – there were 25,000 fewer book titles released in China in 2022 compared to 2021, with a particular reduction in the number of foreign titles published in translation, according to the Chinese media project.<sup>32</sup> This shows that controlling state action against religious groups often goes together with wider restrictions on

free expression and civil society – more people than Christians bear the cost of control. The new regulations apply to state-approved religious organisations such as the Three Self Patriotic Movement or Catholic CPA, as non-registered religious groups remain illegal. Although such unregistered ‘house churches’ initially began as small house groups gathering for worship, many grew immensely, holding their meetings in public places like hotel facilities or rented office floors. These churches frequently had hundreds or even thousands of Christians attending every week. But that freedom is now over, due in part to the authorities taking advantage of measures enforced because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Meanwhile, the use of new technology to enforce conformity in China is gaining attention. Open Doors highlighted the growth of surveillance and censorship via emerging technology in our 2022 report on digital persecution.<sup>33</sup> According to the latest research, a growing number of patent filings in China concern technology which helps to identify deviant or abnormal behaviour – and for the Chinese authorities, this would include participation in illegal Christian groups.<sup>34</sup>

It is likely that in response to such demand from the authorities, companies will develop AI-assisted tools for identifying such behaviour. Moreover, this will not simply affect Christians in China. A 2012 Open Technology Fund report identifies around 100 countries within the Chinese technosphere: purchasing technology from China and in some cases being trained by China in its use.

Likewise, China's increasing role in Africa – in infrastructure, technology, and training – is enabling and strengthening autocratic



<sup>32</sup> [chinamediaproject.org/2023/04/25/a-new-era-for-chinas-readers](https://chinamediaproject.org/2023/04/25/a-new-era-for-chinas-readers)

<sup>33</sup> [media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/Open%20Doors%20Digital%20Persecution%20Report.pdf](https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/Open%20Doors%20Digital%20Persecution%20Report.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> Wright J & Weber V & Walton G F: “Identifying potential emerging human rights implications in Chinese smart cities via machine-learning aided patent analysis”, in: Internet Policy Review 12/3, 28 July 2023



These photos are from leaked police files in Xinjiang. Images courtesy of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation

regimes on the continent. Companies like Huawei are making massive inroads into African markets. African governments are spending \$1 billion per year on surveillance technologies, according to the Institute of Development Studies. The biggest customer is Africa's most populous country, Nigeria – both the federal government and individual states within the country. Europe and the United States have been willing sellers of such technology, too, the report notes, but their African market share has been giving way to China.

In addition, at a new campus in Tanzania, the Chinese Communist Party has opened its first overseas academy devoted to training political leaders in Beijing's fusion of one-party rule with economic and social planning. In other words, China is not simply exporting technology, but its own authoritarian political ideology. This only underlines the urgency of agreeing common global standards around new and emerging technology, ensuring that its use respects the rights of all citizens.

#### CHINA AND NORTH KOREA

North Korea remains at number one on the 2024 World Watch List, and China has close connections to the North Korean regime. Last year a new Chinese policy involved stepping up efforts to prevent North Korean defectors from escaping to South Korea – around 600 such defectors were returned in 2023, many of them women.<sup>35</sup> This is particularly concerning given reports that North Korean women in China are highly vulnerable to sexual abuse, human trafficking and modern slavery.<sup>36</sup> Among those calling for China to grant safe passage for North Korean defectors to South Korea have been members of Parliament's APPG on North Korea. In November 2023, a group of North Korean defectors appealed to the UN against China's policy of widespread repatriation.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> [dailynk.com/english/kunming-steps-up-efforts-prevent-defectors-heading-south-korea](https://www.dailynk.com/english/kunming-steps-up-efforts-prevent-defectors-heading-south-korea)

<sup>36</sup> [dw.com/en/north-korean-girls-exploited-in-chinas-red-zone-report/a-65137209](https://www.dw.com/en/north-korean-girls-exploited-in-chinas-red-zone-report/a-65137209)

<sup>37</sup> [telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/north-korean-defectors-china-forced-returns-escapees](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/north-korean-defectors-china-forced-returns-escapees)

# IRAN: Woman, Life, Freedom

Iran stands at number nine on the 2024 Open Doors World Watch List. Human rights in the country became the focus of international attention following the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini at the hands of Iran's Morality Police for allegedly failing to abide by a religious dress code. Her death, and the deaths of other women after her, have been the cause of protests in Iran under the heading of 'Woman, Life, Freedom.'

The protests come in a context of widespread human rights violations against religious minorities in Iran – including Iranian Christians. As noted in an Early Day Motion on the protests from 2023,<sup>38</sup> the obligation to wear a religious dress code imposed on all women, regardless of their beliefs, is itself a violation of the freedom of religion or belief of Iranian women. Women and minorities – including Christians – in Iran pay the price for the control which the authoritarian Iranian regime exerts over its citizens.

The Iranian authorities see Christianity as a Western attempt to undermine the Islamic order in Iran, and so leaders of Christian groups are punished harshly, often with long prison sentences. Christian gatherings in private homes have also been denounced as 'illegal groups'. Supported by Open Doors and others, the #Place2Worship campaign has had some success in challenging these injustices.<sup>39</sup>

Proselytism of Muslims is forbidden in any way. Therefore, it is illegal for traditional Christian groups to interact with Persian-speaking converts, and churches have been forced to close for permitting converts entry. Many Persian-speakers have nowhere to worship as they do not have an officially sanctioned church, and house churches are subjected to frequent raids.

On 19 February 2023, the fifth joint annual report on rights violations against Christians in Iran was published by Article 18, Open Doors, Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Middle East Concern.<sup>40</sup>

This report describes how Christians have been especially vulnerable to persecution, even as all Iranians face restrictions on their human rights.

In addition, the report notes the growing involvement of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in conducting raids on house churches, and a higher incidence of acts of violence committed during arrests and interrogations. Even in rare instances where Christian converts have been cleared in court, they have continued to face harassment. In some cases – in clear violation of their right to espouse a faith of their choice – they have been summoned to attend Islamic 're-education' classes.

Some Persian-speaking Christians were forced to flee the country in 2022, fearing prosecution, but the difficulties of seeking asylum in neighbouring countries make this an unattractive option for most victims. According to another recent report, many Iranians who do escape end up in nearby Türkiye. The report details how such Christian refugees face many challenges, from finding employment or insurance to wider social discrimination, social hostility, and the threat of deportation.<sup>41</sup>

As Christians and others in Iran bear the cost of authoritarian control, it is vital that the UK continues to speak out on behalf of persecuted minorities in the country, both by holding Iran to its human rights obligations in multilateral institutions and by supporting those who have been forced to flee the country because of their religion or belief. We urge the Iranian Government to amend Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution to recognise FoRB for all faiths, as envisaged by Article 18 ICCPR, to which Iran is a signatory without reservation.

<sup>38</sup> [edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/60638](https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/60638)

<sup>39</sup> [articleeighteen.com/place2worship](https://articleeighteen.com/place2worship)

<sup>40</sup> [articleeighteen.com/reports/12622](https://articleeighteen.com/reports/12622)

<sup>41</sup> [articleeighteen.com/reports/13404](https://articleeighteen.com/reports/13404)





Sahar from Iran was forced to leave her home and young family when her husband discovered her new Christian faith. She was later arrested and spent time in prison for church activities. On her release she was reunited with her husband and family, but had to leave Iran due to the persecution she faced

# HIDDEN CONTROL in Saudi Arabia

Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman has worked diligently to promote Saudi Arabia as an open, progressive country that is returning to a more moderate form of Islam. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia stands at number 13 on the 2024 World Watch List and remains a dangerous place to live for Christians.

Saudi Arabia has rapidly increased its presence on the world stage as it strives to diversify its economy beyond the oil industry. It has done so by promoting foreign investment, increasing the amount of small- and medium-sized businesses, and creating jobs by developing mega-projects. These mega-projects include luxury tourism, transportation and entertainment, to name but a few. The Saudi government has also implemented several social reforms, including tourist visas, investment visas for foreigners, and festival seasons with high-end entertainment (concerts and sporting events). It has also lifted the ban on cinemas. Nonetheless, control remains tight in some areas. Over 200 secular musicians and bands performed during a recent concert series in Riyadh – and yet, public Christian worship continues to be forbidden. The strict religious majority maintain their control of the people despite the façade of change that is propagated.

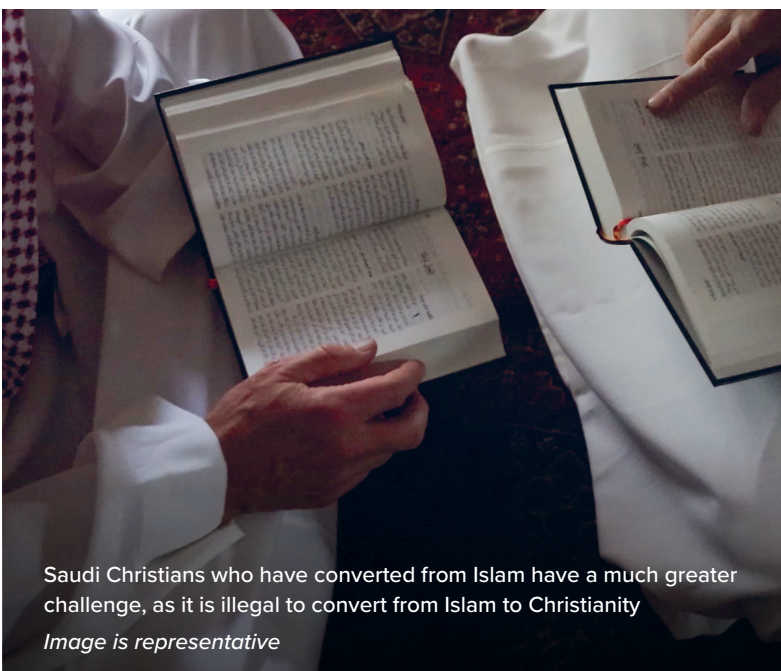
Social reforms in Saudi Arabia are also inconsistent when it comes to gender. For example, the government lifted the driving ban for women, and women have been encouraged to enter the

workforce. Travel restrictions have also been changed to allow women to travel without the permission of their male guardian. But local Saudis will tell you that the visible changes are surface-level, and that corruption and strict Islamic beliefs still rule society. For example, women can only exercise these rights to the extent their families allow. If a Saudi woman chooses to travel without her male guardian despite familial disapproval, when she returns, she will face the discipline of her family.

There are also several Filipino, Indian and African Christian expatriate groups scattered across the country. The expatriates who have the most difficulty in being able to worship with others are day labourers or those who live in communal housing. Many of these foreign workers work six days a week with limited freedom to find a Christian gathering even if there is one in their area. These expats also suffer more persecution as they are often intimidated or harassed when reading their Bibles or trying to worship. They are also severely pressured into accepting Islam and even bribed to convert.

Saudi Christians who have converted from Islam have a much greater challenge, as it is illegal to convert from Islam to Christianity. Technically, conversion is punishable by death. This has occurred in the past and is still threatened and attempted. However, if someone is killed for their Christian faith, it will often not be reported openly or will be misreported as an execution for another offence, such as terrorism. More generally, Saudi Christians may face persecution by their family or community, including abuse, isolation, forced divorce or the removal of children. Secret Christians live under the fear of being discovered, so church is often a small group of believers gathered in a home.

As the UK engages with Saudi Arabia in fields such as trade or diplomatic partnership, it will be vital for our leaders to treat apparent reform and liberalisation with caution, paying attention to the bleak situation for religious minorities in the country.



Saudi Christians who have converted from Islam have a much greater challenge, as it is illegal to convert from Islam to Christianity  
*Image is representative*

# STATE CONTROL for Christians in Algeria

Christians in Algeria are facing an existential threat due to violations of their right to meet for worship by an authoritarian government. Of the 46 churches affiliated with the Église Protestante d'Algérie (the Protestant umbrella organisation), only four remained open in 2023. Several independent churches have also ceased meeting. This situation has emerged through the Algerian government stepping up its campaign of using a 2006 law to increase pressure on the indigenous Protestant church.

Non-Muslim religions in Algeria are regulated by Ordinance 06-03 of 2006 requiring that all places of non-Muslim worship must be authorised by the National Commission for Non-Muslim Worship. However, applications for permission to use buildings as churches and to build new churches have never been accepted by the Commission. Without formal approval, non-Muslim groups must either not function, or operate on an unofficial basis and be vulnerable to closure. Since the Ordinance was passed in 2006, none of the EPA-affiliated churches have received permission to use their premises as places of worship.

The EPA also faced a high level of legal and government pressure after new legislation governing religious associations came into force in 2012, requiring the re-registration of existing associations. The EPA had obtained official recognition as a religious association in 1974. However, the provisions introduced in the 2012 law required that national associations would now have to have a minimum of 25 founding members from at least 12 different provinces.<sup>42</sup> While the group was applying for re-registration, the Algerian authorities used the group's unregistered status as a pretext to close more EPA churches.

Algerian authorities have also been interrogating church leaders and charging them with 'holding worship without permission' or similar offences. During these interrogations, several church leaders



received verbal orders to close their churches – as opposed to official closure orders which could be challenged in court. At least 18 Christians, both church leaders and other people active in the church, have received (suspended) prison sentences, including vice-president of the EPA, Pastor Youssef Ourahmane.

As a result of this government action, pressure has increased to such an extent that the few remaining churches will have to consider ceasing all visible activities in 2024. Such excessive restrictions are clearly inconsistent with the right to freedom of religion or belief, as well as to freedom of assembly. As highlighted in the FCDO's annual *Human Rights and Democracy Report*:

*In Algeria, some Christian groups and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community reported difficulties in practising their faith, largely because of difficulties in registering as a religious minority group. This led to the closure of some churches and arrests. The UK engaged regularly with religious minorities and raised FoRB at Ministerial level during Lord (Tariq) Ahmad's visit in June, as well as in the margins of a FoRB event hosted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in December. Fiona Bruce MP, the PM's Special Envoy for FoRB, met government officials and faith leaders during a visit in September with a delegation from the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance.<sup>43</sup>*

We are grateful for the ongoing work of the Prime Minister's Special Envoy and the UK Government on behalf of Christians in Algeria and urge them to continue to hold Algeria to its international obligations to maintain freedom of religion or belief of all Algerians.

<sup>42</sup> 2012 Law on Associations (Law 12-06 of 2012). Available at [ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/89142/102237/F1188083471/DZA-89142.pdf](https://ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/89142/102237/F1188083471/DZA-89142.pdf) (French).

<sup>43</sup> [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1170047/human-rights-and-democracy-the-2022-foreign-commonwealth-and-development-office-report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1170047/human-rights-and-democracy-the-2022-foreign-commonwealth-and-development-office-report.pdf); page 26.

# AUTHORITARIAN CONTROL in Nicaragua

While standing at number 50 on the 2023 World Watch List, persecution of Christians in the country has sharply increased, and the country is now at number 30 this year. This rapid rise in persecution is one of the fastest recorded among all countries on the World Watch List this year, indicating the seriousness of the situation.

Nicaragua's higher place on the World Watch List comes from the increasingly open hostility by the Ortega-Murillo regime towards the church. This hostility fits with the regime's increasing authoritarian control since its election in 2006, and especially following its crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in 2018. As in other cases around the world, Christians often pay a disproportionate price under authoritarian control.

## **Christians have faced explicit legal restrictions on their religious liberty. Christian leaders have been arrested alongside other critics of the government.**

Increasingly in the 2024 reporting period, Christians have faced explicit legal restrictions on their religious liberty. Christian leaders have been arrested alongside other critics of the government – with some Roman Catholic priests and bishops being accused of espionage, and others having been denied citizenship and forced into exile. In addition, Christian institutions (such as universities) have also had their registration cancelled, and Christian media outlets or other property have been seized. Some Christian celebrations have also been prohibited in public spaces. Sadly, in its disregard for human rights, Nicaragua is increasingly resembling Cuba: the highest Latin

American country on the World Watch List, at number 22.

In the latter part of 2022, the Nicaraguan Government made several accusations against the Bishop of Matagalpa, Rolando Álvarez, who is a vocal defender of civic freedoms in Nicaragua. The bishop was stripped of his citizenship and, after refusing exile, was sentenced in February 2023 to more than 26 years in prison. The magistrate who read out the sentence on national TV said that the bishop was, 'considered a traitor to the country and guilty, as a co-perpetrator, of the crimes of undermining national integrity, propagation of false news through information and communication technologies, obstruction of functions, aggravated disobedience or contempt of authority, all committed in real competition and to the detriment of Nicaraguan society and the State of Nicaragua'.<sup>44</sup>

Following the conviction and detention of Álvarez, the Nicaraguan Government was denounced by the European Union and US State Department, with the latter placing visa restrictions on complicit officials in Nicaragua.<sup>45</sup> In addition, in September 2023, the UN Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua issued a statement which identified the human rights violations in the country as crimes against humanity.<sup>46</sup>

The UK Government has also called for the release of Bishop Álvarez, and all political prisoners in Nicaragua, identifying the crackdown on dissent in the country as evidence of a serious democratic crisis.<sup>47</sup> In the light of the rapidly deteriorating situation for Christians and others in Nicaragua, we urge the UK Government to continue to press the Nicaraguan Government to uphold the freedom of religion or belief, expression and assembly for all its citizens, and to release those detained as political prisoners.

<sup>44</sup> catholicnewsworld.com/2023/02/breakingnews-catholic-bishop-rolando.html

<sup>45</sup> state.gov/promoting-accountability-for-the-ortega-murillo-regime-for-restricting-freedoms

<sup>46</sup> ohchr.org/en/news/2023/09/group-experts-nicaragua-finds-escalating-persecution-against-dissent-and-crackdown

<sup>47</sup> questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-07-17/HL9398

# GENDER-SPECIFIC RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Open Doors research reveals that persecution affects men and women in differently around the world. Last year, Open Doors published its sixth research report into gender-specific religious persecution. Entitled *A Web of Forces*, the report describes how multiple areas of persecution (or 'pressure points') may combine to constrict the lives of Christian men and women in contexts of persecution.

The report draws particular attention to the situation facing Christian women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), where family members often exert control over their lives and religious beliefs. Such religious persecution has been exacerbated by conflict and post-conflict dynamics, economic inequality, and the long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sexual violence is a common form of persecution, with cases of sexual harassment and assault against Christian women recorded in almost all the countries in the region studied by Open Doors researchers. In addition, women in many countries in the MENA region are vulnerable to discrimination in the legal system, which can lead to forced marriage, forced divorce and the loss of custody of children in the case of conversion.<sup>48</sup>

This vulnerability and control are particularly evident in the digital sphere. As our report notes:

“In cultures where women and girls have little privacy and men hold ultimate authority in the home, the digital world is another sphere for domestic control and abuse. In MENA countries such as Qatar, male guardianship practices facilitate, even encourage, digital control. Additionally, discovery of faith-related activity by families who are hostile to Christianity can be a persistent risk due to the exploitation of digital forms of monitoring and surveillance. Female secret believers may encounter high levels of control of their digital lives via surveillance apps, such as

those designed for husbands to track and monitor their wives, and weekly or daily checks of the phones of the female members of households. For example, in Oman, it is very common for women and younger relatives to have their phones and social media regularly searched by family members. There have been reports that these invasive methods of monitoring have led to forms of self-censorship, with women choosing to limit or avoid Christian materials in the home out of fear of being discovered and the severe consequences that could follow.”<sup>49</sup>

If Christian materials are discovered through this surveillance, the consequences for women can be horrific. Our research cites the following examples:

“[I]n Saudi Arabia, where a system of male guardianship operates, a [World Watch List] country expert describes: ‘A female convert was beaten, locked in her room, verbally abused, and forced to marry a Muslim all because her family found Christian text messages on her phone.’ In the most extreme cases, surveillance of digital activity can lead to honour killings. On International Women’s Day (8 March 2022), reports emerged of 20-year-old Maria from Iraqi-Kurdistan, who was killed by her uncle and brother. With tens of thousands of followers on social media, she had long been an advocate for women’s rights and freedoms, having herself experienced forced marriage at the age of 12. The young woman was well known for her online activism, which together with her conversion to Christianity (and re-naming herself as Maria), is believed to have been a motivation for her killing.”<sup>50</sup>

This is just one case of many in which Christian women are vulnerable both because of their faith and their gender. Violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, increasing digital control and societal gender norms all combine to restrict the lives of women from religious minorities. In UK development work, it is therefore vital that the additional vulnerability of religious minority status

<sup>48</sup> The full report *A Web of Forces* can be read here: [opendoors.org/thegenderreport](https://opendoors.org/thegenderreport)

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, page 17

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, page 17

is recognised and that policies are put in place to respond to it well.

With this in mind, it was disappointing to see that the FCDO International Women and Girls Strategy contained no reference either to freedom of religion or belief or to this additional vulnerability.<sup>51</sup>

This is in contrast to the more recent White Paper on International Development, which commits the UK to ensuring that ‘UK development policies are inclusive of people who are marginalised for their religion or belief.’<sup>52</sup> It remains vital for future FCDO work in support of women and girls to take religious identity into account.

### CASE STUDY: PAKISTAN

Rehena\*, a Pakistani Christian, gives an account of what life is like for Christian women in Pakistan:

*“I have no choice other than to work at the factory. I have an eight-year-old son, Jadoon. My father is sick. And I’m a single mother. I’m the only one who can take care of my son and my father. It’s bad enough that I have to leave them alone every night.*

*“I remember one woman who used to work in the same factory where I am. She had completed her work and whispered the name of Jesus under her breath. Her floor manager told her never to say that again.*

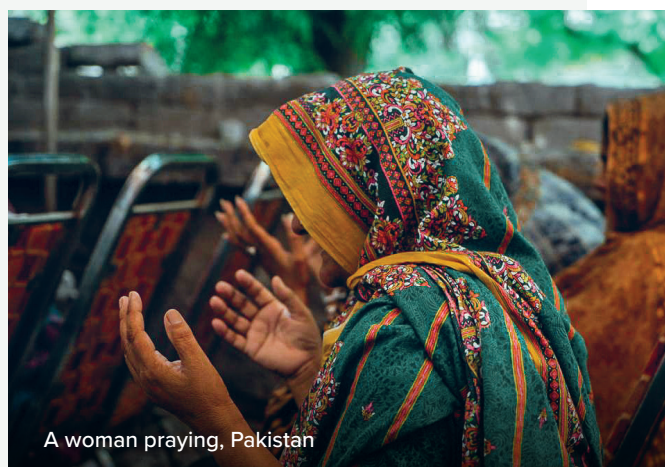
*He began to harass her and ask her to massage his shoulders. One day, he tried to touch her. When she fought back, he was so angry he kicked her out of the factory. He said there would be more consequences, and a few days later, she was accused of blasphemy – of desecrating the Quran.”*

For Rehena, discrimination based on her faith is not limited to the workplace. She goes on:

*“Being a Christian woman is hard. When I had my son, I was put on a dirty bed that still had blood from the woman who had given birth before me. Other women were given a clean bed, but for me, the ‘Isai’, the Urdu word for ‘Christian’, there was only the option of a dirty bed.*

Believers in Pakistan are often regarded as second-class citizens and are forced to work in menial jobs. Any Christian accused of blasphemy can face mob violence, as we saw in Jaranwala in August. In that city, a mob attacked a Christian community, burning down several churches and homes after two Christians were accused of blasphemy.

Every year, hundreds of Pakistani women face pressure and abuse because they are Christian and female. Christian women and girls are kidnapped and forced into Muslim marriages. And more than 600,000 Christian women work in factories in conditions like those that Rehena describes.



A woman praying, Pakistan

<sup>51</sup> [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1141525/international-women-and-girls-strategy-2023-2030.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1141525/international-women-and-girls-strategy-2023-2030.pdf)

<sup>52</sup> [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6560874b0c7ec8000d95bdcf/international-development-in-a-contested-world-ending-extreme-poverty-and-tackling-climate-change.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6560874b0c7ec8000d95bdcf/international-development-in-a-contested-world-ending-extreme-poverty-and-tackling-climate-change.pdf)

# THE PERSECUTION OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Tragically, persecution also affects Christian children. Children, too, have the right to freedom of religion or belief, as set out in both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. Open Doors research identifies ways in which children and young people are particularly impacted by persecution, affecting their later lives.

Discrimination in the education system is particularly widespread and has been identified as taking place in every country on the World Watch List. For example, educational curricula may include demeaning stereotypes deployed against religious minorities, including Christians, or calls to religious violence. Christian children and young people may also experience bullying from parents or teachers or be forced to undertake studies in the majority religion to graduate.

In some cases (for example, in China – see page 32), Christians are among those reluctant to even access state-run education. However, if they choose to educate their children at home, they also face discrimination. In other cases, such as in Bangladesh, Christian converts can struggle even to gain admission to the village school. Elsewhere, when the rule of law and basic security collapses, children and young people may be internally displaced or become refugees due to the threat of violence and may, as a result, be completely unable to access education.

Beyond the education system, children and young people may be denied access to Bibles, youth groups and other sources of Christian teaching; in some countries, children and young people are specifically prohibited from attending public worship. Children may also be separated from Christian parents, including in cases where a parent converts. In these overlapping restrictions, children too clearly pay the cost of control and authoritarianism.

The impact of persecution on children and young people can be long-lasting, and can ripple out to the family, friends and fellow church



Rejection and isolation for being a Christian is especially hard for children like Bijli from Bangladesh. “My friends don’t want to play with me. They push me,” she says

members of the children concerned. What’s more, persecution can embed patterns of discrimination and marginalisation as the children of Christians and other religious minorities lose access to opportunities for advancement.

To counteract the long-term effects of persecution on children and young people, we urge the UK, in its work in contexts of persecution, to recognise this. We hope that this will, in turn, drive policy to counteract such persecution, such as by encouraging states to remove religiously prejudiced references from their educational curricula and bring punitive action against any person found to be harassing a child due to his or her religious background.

### CASE STUDY – CHINA

Xiaolu\* is in her early teens and grew up in a devout Christian family in north west China. Due to the widespread indoctrination and anti-Christian bias in China's state-run education system, Xiaolu's parents decided to homeschool her. However, homeschooling is technically illegal, and exclusion from state-run schools means a denial of access to university, with implications for Xiaolu's future. Many other Christian parents feel forced to send their children to state-run schools despite the nationalistic and atheistic materials they may encounter.

"Homeschooling is a controversial issue in the country," shares Ai\*, Xiaolu's mother. "As Christian parents, we are concerned with the beliefs and ideas instilled in our children's minds." Thanks to the required 'red education' – Communist teachings in state-sponsored schools – in China, Ai thought it was best for her daughter to learn at home, even if that meant a future sacrifice. According to *Christianity Today*, there are around 18,000 children in China who were homeschooled in 2013, the most recent year for which data is available.<sup>53</sup>

Christian schools catering to Chinese citizens must operate discreetly or risk closure. In Beijing, one popular Christian school – Golden Reed Kindergarten & Primary School Learning Center – was closed in 2020, resulting in hundreds of students being left without a school to attend. The restrictions placed upon Christian schools in the country meant that they were not a good option for Xiaolu's parents. According to Ai: "The students gather at a specific spot at eight in the morning to catch a school bus and they go [in the building through a basement] to avoid drawing attention. Students stayed in a tiny room for the entire day, and they have no [opportunities] to go outside during break time."

Xiaolu is aware that she is different from other kids because she is a Christian. She does not attend regular school and does not wear a uniform like other kids in her community.

Xiaolu feels embarrassed about her circumstances, "I get tired of having to explain my situation over and over again." Xiaolu says she tries to steer the conversation to a different subject, or sometimes she invents excuses for why she's at home.

But it's not just embarrassment – this is how she protects herself and her family from being reported. "As a teenager, I yearn for a community," Xiaolou shares. "I want to make more friends, but this might not happen anymore."



A teenage girl praying, China

<sup>53</sup> [christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/april/china-education-school-homeschooling-restrictions.html](https://christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/april/china-education-school-homeschooling-restrictions.html)





Ermias reading the Bible to Fasil and Ezana, Ethiopia

### **CASE STUDY – ETHIOPIA**

Fasil and Ezana Tadesse\* are twin brothers from a seemingly peaceful village in Ethiopia, where lush trees and meadows abound. At first glance, it looks like a wonderful village for two young boys to grow up in. However – their village has long been an unwelcome place for evangelical Christians like the Tadesse family, who are the religious minority group in the area.

Their pastor recalls death threats that new converts receive if they choose to follow Jesus.

The twins' father, Ermias\*, has experienced persecution first-hand. As an evangelist, he has been attacked for sharing his faith and has seen the church stoned by assailants during worship. He and his wife are all too aware that persecution doesn't only impact the adults but also their sons. For example, because the twins are Christians, their test scores are purposely lowered so that their grades do not reflect their true capabilities.

The twins now attend a bridge school, an Open Doors-supported project that creates a 'bridge' between the Christian community and the surrounding neighbourhood. It's a safe place for Christian children to get the education they deserve, free of persecution. A bridge school also offers non-religious education that is open to all children regardless of their faith.

# STORIES OF RESILIENCE

The Open Doors World Watch List often presents a bleak picture of growing persecution around the world. In so many ways, parts of the world are indeed becoming more dangerous for Christians. Even apparently hopeful signs can be swiftly snuffed out. However, on its own this would be an incomplete picture. Behind every statistic on persecution, Open Doors researchers hear story after story of Christians not simply being victims of attack, but standing firm in the face of intimidation, responding with love for their communities, and even forgiving their persecutors. Often Open Doors partners have been able to provide assistance in such cases. What follows are just a few such stories, though many more could be told.

## DISASTER RELIEF IN SYRIA

Following the earthquake in Syria on 6 February 2023, Open Doors local partners were among the first to respond to the situation, providing several churches with food, water, blankets, mattresses and heaters, equipping them to reach out to their hurting communities. There are an estimated 50,000 Christians still in the Aleppo and Latakia areas.

It was in the midst of all this that Merry\* felt God prompt her to help. In 2022, she'd taken part in Open Doors training, in which she organised meals and was taught first aid. "I felt that I was back in the sports training and, based on that experience, I was scheduling meals for the people and helping with distribution of food and blankets," Merry says. "I was entrusted with a responsibility in the [sports programme], and I was entrusted with it here as well. I couldn't sit still, I had to do something."

Along with her brother and three other young people who had all participated in the Open Doors training, Merry created a relief team to help people through the aftermath of the earthquakes. The team received help from relatives and friends who live abroad and began buying, bagging, and distributing packages of food and hygiene products to needy people.

"We know each other's strengths and weaknesses, and we split the tasks just like a football team,"



Merry with a food package for the earthquake victims, Syria

she says. "For us, 'winning' was helping people and showing humanity; we have a message to send, and that's the message of love. In the 12 days after the earthquake, we were able to show love more [often] than we were able to share during the 12 years of war. For us, 'winning' was helping people and showing humanity."

Following the earthquake, Open Doors partners in Syria were able to assist families in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, and to get homes inspected and repaired, to ensure that they were safe places to which people could return.

## RELEASE OF PRISONERS IN IRAN

Homayoun and Sara, two Christian converts in Iran, were acquitted and released from the notorious Evin prison in May 2023. They had been arrested for belonging to a house church, and had been in prison since August 2022, sentenced to 11 and two years respectively. While their first two requests for appeals were rejected, at the May appeal the judge stated that: "The reports by the officers of the Ministry of Intelligence about organisation of home-groups to promote Christianity, membership and participation in home-groups are not considered as acts against the

country's security, and the law has not recognised them as criminal activity." Despite many setbacks and great hostility, and even in the current chaos in Iran, there are occasional signs of hope.

### **FORGIVENESS OF PERSECUTORS IN NIGERIA**

Ayuba\* was only 20 when his father was murdered by Islamist extremists in a vicious attack on his village in north east Nigeria. The militants deliberately targeted his father for his Christian faith. Soon after this attack, Ayuba vowed to take revenge. He even started carrying a knife. In the face of further attacks, however, he moved further south in Nigeria, where he received trauma care from Open Doors partners. Our partners have been supporting persecuted believers in sub-Saharan Africa for many years, and so their networks are expertly equipped and experienced to support people like Ayuba. Ayuba found this trauma care transformative. When asked about the biggest lesson he learned at the

trauma care centre, he says, "Forgiveness." Before the counselling, he was determined to murder the man who'd betrayed his father – but, at the trauma centre, he handed over the knife he'd been carrying. "Before coming here, I had decided never to forgive, and to avenge my father's death," Ayuba says. "I have no problem with this man now. If we meet, we would greet each other." While more must surely be done to work against extremist attacks in Nigeria, the lives of survivors can still also be transformed, preventing a cycle of violence.

### **SHARING MEAGRE RESOURCES IN NORTH KOREA**

Christians are in great danger in North Korea, and if discovered, they risk arrest, imprisonment and even immediate execution. Despite this great danger, secret Christians in North Korea are reportedly sharing food with their neighbours as the country is devastated by shortages.

Food prices have skyrocketed in the country. A kilogram of food can cost more than 5,000 North Korean won, which is the equivalent of about £5. A kilo of corn costs around £2. Given that the average salary for a North Korean is only 5,000-10,000 won per month, such meagre rations are making it incredibly difficult for many North Koreans to survive.

"There are inspiring stories told to us that [North Korean] believers are helping their neighbours – sharing food, medicine and other resources they own, even though the food is not enough for even themselves," says Brother Simon\*, Open Doors coordinator for North Korea ministry.



Ayuba receiving trauma care from an Open Doors partner, Nigeria

# CHALLENGE TO THE UK GOVERNMENT

This report demonstrates that Christian communities around the world are acutely vulnerable, whether in the context of their states collapsing under pressure or as a result of governments seeking to control the lives of all citizens. As whole regions of the world become insecure and dangerous, the UK must continue to do all it can to encourage stability and the rule of law globally, even as new alliances emerge that place their trust in authoritarian leadership.

In fragile states around the world, both internal divisions and external malign influences are forcing communities apart. Not only does this create the risk of instability and even collapse, but it is also forcing Christians to flee areas in which they have lived for generations. In particular, the violence in sub-Saharan Africa highlighted in this report is displacing people at a rate that risks an unprecedented humanitarian crisis.

At the same time, some governments are taking refuge in authoritarianism – but this only provides the illusion of stability at a significant cost for religious minorities. It is they, including persecuted Christians, who often suffer disproportionately from authoritarian control, whether through new

technological surveillance and censorship or because of age-old dictatorial paranoia.

In response to these dual challenges, we urge the UK to prioritise freedom of religion or belief. We urge the UK Government to make human rights standards central in its dealings and negotiations with other countries. And, building on the success of the UK's AI conference this year, we encourage the Government to use its influence in the international community to establish global human rights standards around new and emerging technology, to prevent such technology being used to persecute already marginalised religious and ethnic communities. We also ask that the Government continue to build on its recent commitment to FoRB by establishing, in statute, the role of Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

One of the recommendations from the Bishop of Truro's report into UK support for persecuted Christians was that the UK should become a global leader for FoRB. The UK Government has made significant strides in this direction, and we urge ministers to continue to press into this vital freedom, which is the key to so many others.



Pastor Zachariah's village was destroyed by suspected Fulani militants, Nigeria

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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

- Promote and protect freedom of religion or belief as a leading priority in foreign policy and diplomatic engagement, both at a bilateral level and through the UK's role at the UN.
- Establish the role of the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on FoRB permanently in statute.
- Commit fresh resources to building stability in fragile states, ensuring that an understanding of FoRB and the additional vulnerability of religious minorities is fully integrated into its efforts.
- Work with partners in international institutions to raise the persecution of Christians with other governments around the world (for example, by ensuring that FoRB-focused recommendations are made in Nigeria's upcoming Universal Periodic Review.)
- Publish a trade strategy which sets out how trade can be used to promote human rights and serve other core aims of UK foreign policy, ensuring that any trade or engagement with authoritarian regimes goes hand-in-hand with insistence on human rights standards.
- Recognise the connection between the persecution of Christians or other religious minorities and the risk of mass atrocities, ensuring that this is addressed by the new Mass Atrocity Prevention Hub at the FCDO.
- Ensure that UK support for those who have fled persecution as refugees or IDPs on the grounds of religion or belief addresses these specific vulnerabilities in countries around the world.
- Recognise the gender-specific nature of the persecution of women and girls from religious minorities in relevant FCDO strategies. We recommend that the UK include targeted programming and aid for these women, with faith clearly recognised as a factor of vulnerability.
- Acknowledge human rights concerns around emerging technology, taking the lead on developing international standards and ethical frameworks around the export and use of such technology around the world.

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

- Using oral and written questions to encourage the Government to maintain its commitment to FoRB.
- Joining the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- Speaking out publicly and contributing to debates about Christian persecution wherever possible.
- Accessing Open Doors briefing materials to keep informed about specific countries and persecution issues.



Field workers, North Korea

# OPEN DOORS ADVOCACY

Open Doors UK & Ireland is part of a global NGO, operating in over 70 countries for more than 65 years with a call to 'strengthen what remains' for Christian communities facing serious persecution. Open Doors advocacy work supports Christians by protecting and promoting freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) as defined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This covers both private belief and public practice.

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

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

Open Doors has continued to highlight the plight of persecuted Christians to MPs and Ministers. We play an active role in the All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief as a stakeholder, and we also continue to be a stakeholder in the UK FoRB Forum. We have contributed to parliamentary events on Iran and Manipur, India, in response to reports of violent persecution in those countries. We also submitted research to the APPG on FoRB to inform its most recent report on Nigeria, and to the Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry on the Middle East and North Africa.

Internationally, Open Doors has been involved in advocacy at the United Nations as a contributor to India's Universal Periodic Review process, highlighting persecution of religious minorities and the issue of hateful and inciting speech on religious grounds.

Open Doors advocacy team relies on our partners on the ground to give us the latest up-to-date information to ensure that we can speak up for the most persecuted in the public sphere. The World Watch List allows us to discern global trends, highlight new and emerging areas of concern, and identify where our work has made

the most difference. World Watch List data remains a trusted and credible source of information about the persecution of Christians globally and are 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 would like further information, please contact Open Doors UK & Ireland's Advocacy team at [advocacy@opendoorsuk.org](mailto:advocacy@opendoorsuk.org)

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Open Doors is committed to the highest level of research and reporting. The World Watch List, produced annually, is the product of intensive year-round monitoring by the World Watch Research (WWR) department of Open Doors. They have worked diligently over the years to create a ranking system that accurately portrays Christian persecution globally, resulting in a rounded and nuanced ranking that remains trusted around the world. The reporting period for the World Watch List 2024 was 1 October 2022 – 30 September 2023.

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

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

In addition to primary research, secondary data collated from academic sources, reliable news outlets and NGOs are cross-referenced with primary research to ensure the widest survey of available data and the most reliable output.

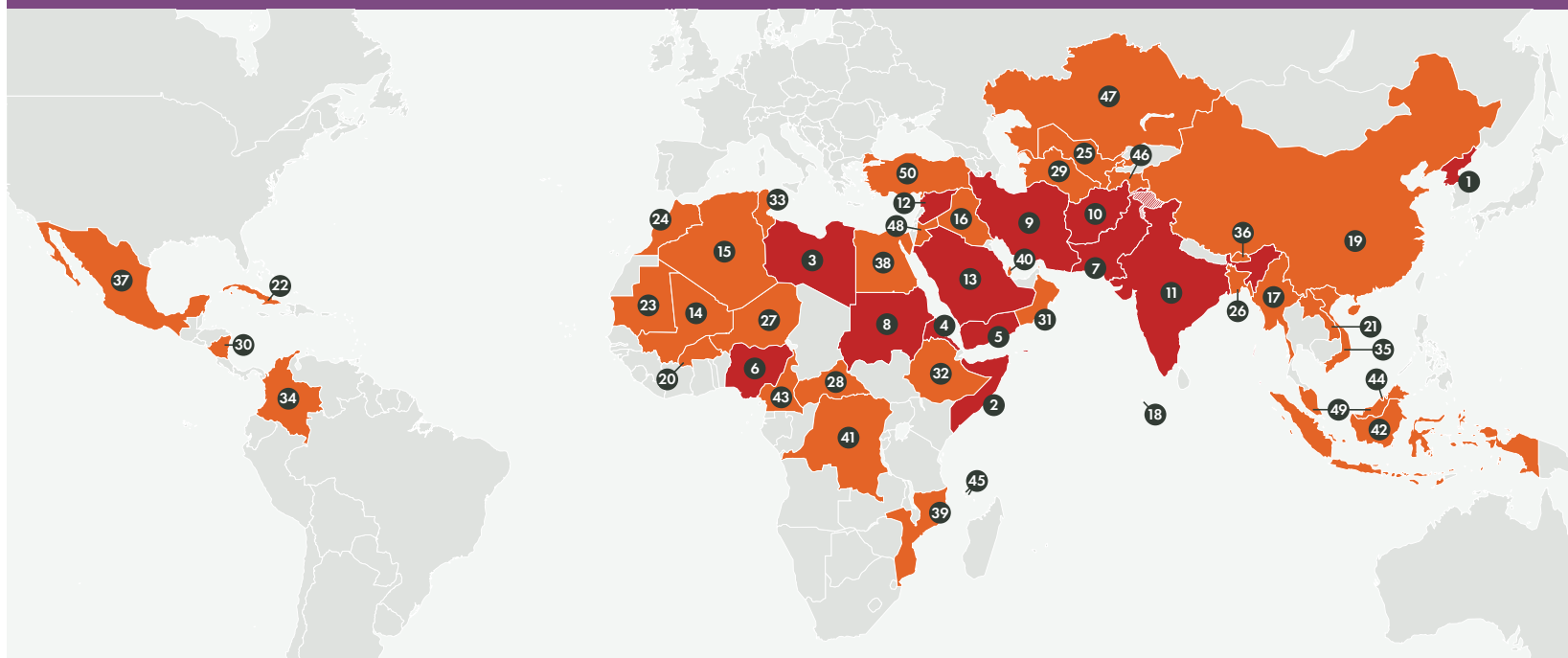
Furthermore, academics and independent experts give input, as well. These methods have been independently audited by the International Institute of Religious Freedom to ensure the highest levels of accuracy, transparency, and consistency.

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.”

**The definition of persecution used in World Watch List analysis is: "Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide." (Complete WWL Methodology, October 2023, p.7)**

For more detailed information on the World Watch List Methodology, please contact [advocacy@opendoorsuk.org](mailto:advocacy@opendoorsuk.org)

# THE 2024 OPEN DOORS WORLD WATCH LIST TOP 50



**● EXTREME LEVELS OF PERSECUTION**

**● VERY HIGH LEVELS OF PERSECUTION**

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



**OpenDoors**

SERVING PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS WORLDWIDE

[opendoorsuk.org](https://opendoorsuk.org) | [advocacy@opendoorsuk.org](mailto:advocacy@opendoorsuk.org)

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

