

Aid to the Church in Need

ACN IRELAND

Persecuted and Forgotten?

A REPORT ON CHRISTIANS OPPRESSED FOR THEIR FAITH

2024—2026

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Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2024-26

Published by ACN Ireland | Castle Building, 426 Clontarf Road, Dollymount, Dublin 3, D03 FP52 | Tel: +353 (0)1 837 7516 | Email: info@acnireland.org

All photos © Aid to the Church in Need except except pp. 7, 15, 17, 21, 22, 27, 31, 37, 38 via Pexels; p. 10 via Radio Veritas Mandalay; p. 26 via Unsplash; pp. 6-7, 20, 35, back cover © Ismael Martínez Sánchez / ACN; p. 11 © Cristian Gennari; p. 13 used under the Creative Commons CC0 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/deed.en); p. 30 used under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.en).

Texts by John Newton, John Pontifex, Elliott Banks and Nathalie Raffray. Special thanks to Tony Smith and Steve Riedlinger.

Thanks also to all who have helped this project in any way, including Peter Bhatti, the late Ernie Chan, Errol Palmer and Marta Petrosillo.

Designed by Helen Anderson. ISBN 978-1-907541-06-3.

ACN is a Pontifical Foundation of the Catholic Church and a registered charity in Republic of Ireland (20023768) and Northern Ireland (102345).

THE VOICE OF MY BROTHER LIVES ON



By Peter Bhatti

FOREWORD

The news of my brother Shahbaz Bhatti's assassination changed my life forever. It was a moment of profound sorrow and unimaginable loss. While our family mourned the loss of a beloved brother, Pakistan lost a courageous leader whose unwavering commitment to justice, human rights, and religious freedom inspired countless people around the world.

Shahbaz served as Pakistan's Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs and was the only Christian member of the federal cabinet. A tireless advocate for the oppressed, he courageously defended Asia Bibi, the first Christian woman sentenced to death under Pakistan's blasphemy laws, and called for reforms to legislation that has too often been misused against innocent people. His principled stand brought repeated death threats from extremists.

On 2nd March 2011, as Shahbaz travelled from our mother's home in Islamabad, gunmen ambushed his vehicle. They fired 26 bullets, killing him, and left behind pamphlets claiming responsibility for the attack.

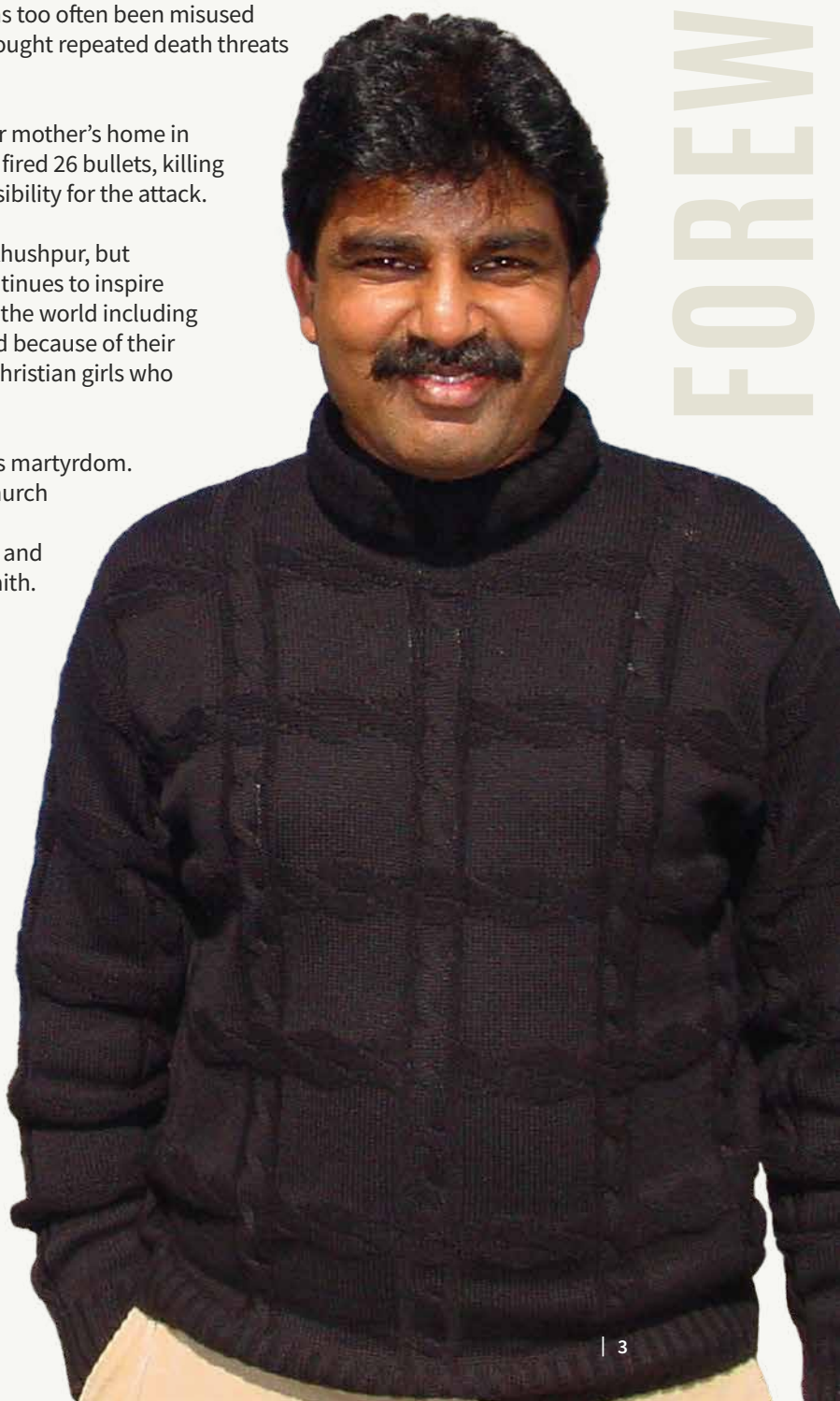
His body was laid to rest in our native village of Khushpur, but his voice was not buried with him. His legacy continues to inspire those who defend persecuted Christians around the world including children facing discrimination, churches attacked because of their faith, families denied basic human dignity, and Christian girls who are abducted, forcibly converted, and abused.

This year marks the 15th anniversary of Shahbaz's martyrdom. It also marks the 10th anniversary of Aid to the Church in Need's #RedWednesday campaign, which has united Christians worldwide in prayer, solidarity, and advocacy for those who suffer because of their faith.

Like Shahbaz, Aid to the Church in Need's *Persecuted and Forgotten?* report gives a voice to the suffering Church. By sharing these stories, it reminds us that religious persecution remains a painful reality for millions of Christians today.

Shortly before his assassination, Shahbaz said, "I believe in Jesus Christ, who has given His own life for us, and I am ready to die for a cause." He remained faithful to those words until his final breath.

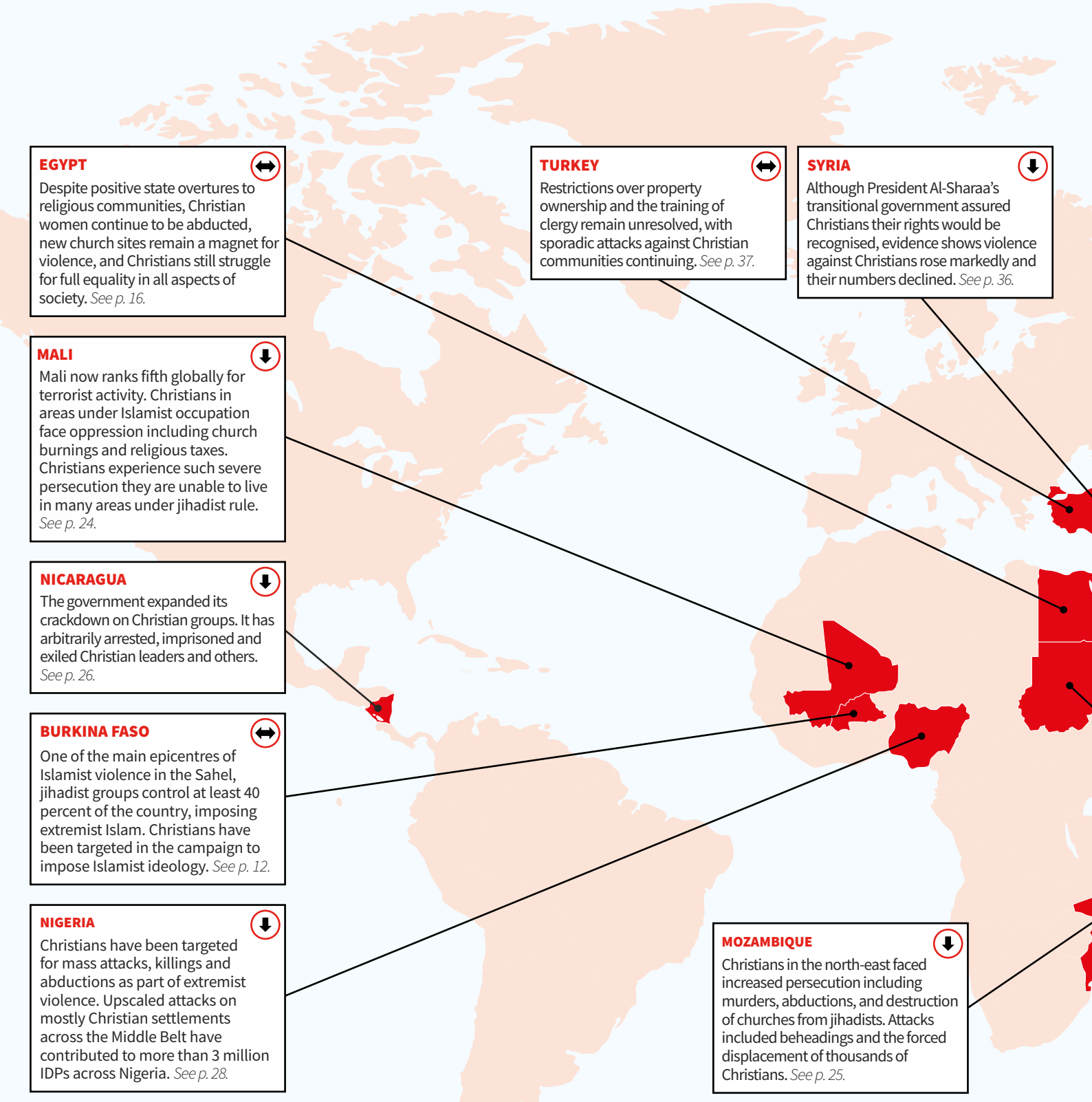
As we reflect on his witness, let us ask ourselves: What are we willing to do for our persecuted brothers and sisters?



COUNTRIES OVERVIEW

Persecuted and Forgotten? examines the challenges facing Christians in 18 countries. These are not necessarily the 18 most dangerous places in which to live if you are a Christian, but rather those countries in which the situation of the faithful has been of particular concern during the period under review.

ACN (UK) has drawn on a number of sources including publicly available data and information from the local Church. While drawing on quantitative analyses (e.g. the Pew Forum's Social Hostilities Index), ultimately *Persecuted and Forgotten?* represents a qualitative analysis of the available data.



EGYPT

Despite positive state overtures to religious communities, Christian women continue to be abducted, new church sites remain a magnet for violence, and Christians still struggle for full equality in all aspects of society. *See p. 16.*

TURKEY

Restrictions over property ownership and the training of clergy remain unresolved, with sporadic attacks against Christian communities continuing. *See p. 37.*

SYRIA

Although President Al-Sharaa's transitional government assured Christians their rights would be recognised, evidence shows violence against Christians rose markedly and their numbers declined. *See p. 36.*

MALI

Mali now ranks fifth globally for terrorist activity. Christians in areas under Islamist occupation face oppression including church burnings and religious taxes. Christians experience such severe persecution they are unable to live in many areas under jihadist rule. *See p. 24.*

NICARAGUA

The government expanded its crackdown on Christian groups. It has arbitrarily arrested, imprisoned and exiled Christian leaders and others. *See p. 26.*

BURKINA FASO

One of the main epicentres of Islamist violence in the Sahel, jihadist groups control at least 40 percent of the country, imposing extremist Islam. Christians have been targeted in the campaign to impose Islamist ideology. *See p. 12.*

NIGERIA

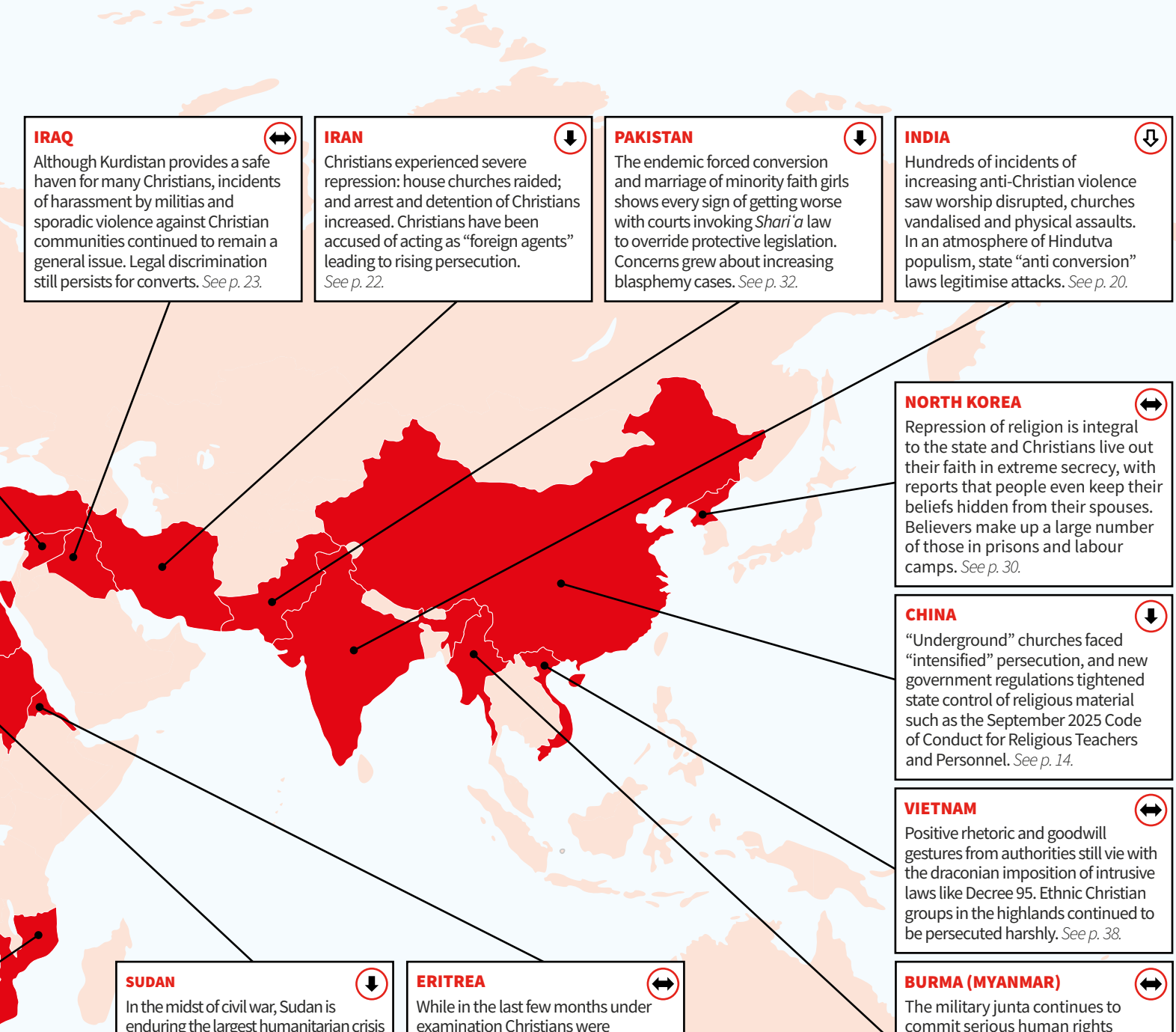
Christians have been targeted for mass attacks, killings and abductions as part of extremist violence. Upscaled attacks on mostly Christian settlements across the Middle Belt have contributed to more than 3 million IDPs across Nigeria. *See p. 28.*

MOZAMBIQUE

Christians in the north-east faced increased persecution including murders, abductions, and destruction of churches from jihadists. Attacks included beheadings and the forced displacement of thousands of Christians. *See p. 25.*

PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS
COMPARED WITH 2022–2024

- = Better
- = Slightly better
- = No change
- = Slightly Worse
- = Worse



IRAQ
Although Kurdistan provides a safe haven for many Christians, incidents of harassment by militias and sporadic violence against Christian communities continued to remain a general issue. Legal discrimination still persists for converts. *See p. 23.*

IRAN
Christians experienced severe repression: house churches raided; and arrest and detention of Christians increased. Christians have been accused of acting as "foreign agents" leading to rising persecution. *See p. 22.*

PAKISTAN
The endemic forced conversion and marriage of minority faith girls shows every sign of getting worse with courts invoking *Shari'a* law to override protective legislation. Concerns grew about increasing blasphemy cases. *See p. 32.*

INDIA
Hundreds of incidents of increasing anti-Christian violence saw worship disrupted, churches vandalised and physical assaults. In an atmosphere of Hindutva populism, state "anti conversion" laws legitimise attacks. *See p. 20.*

NORTH KOREA
Repression of religion is integral to the state and Christians live out their faith in extreme secrecy, with reports that people even keep their beliefs hidden from their spouses. Believers make up a large number of those in prisons and labour camps. *See p. 30.*

CHINA
"Underground" churches faced "intensified" persecution, and new government regulations tightened state control of religious material such as the September 2025 Code of Conduct for Religious Teachers and Personnel. *See p. 14.*

VIETNAM
Positive rhetoric and goodwill gestures from authorities still vie with the draconian imposition of intrusive laws like Decree 95. Ethnic Christian groups in the highlands continued to be persecuted harshly. *See p. 38.*

SUDAN
In the midst of civil war, Sudan is enduring the largest humanitarian crisis in the world, bordering on "genocide", where persecution of Christians is increasing: churches attacked, priests tortured and Christians pressured to convert. *See p. 34.*

ERITREA
While in the last few months under examination Christians were released and there were no new arbitrary arrests, nevertheless the general picture has remained one of consistent intrusive interference in religious life. *See p. 18.*

BURMA (MYANMAR)
The military junta continues to commit serious human rights violations including attacks on religious sites — with claims 300+ churches have been laid to waste. Some ministers of religion have been kidnapped or even killed. *See p. 13.*

PERSECUTED AND FORGOTTEN?

Main Findings


A funeral in Bihar State, India.

“ They immediately asked us to convert and, when we refused, they started beating us. They flogged us with whips. Our legs were put in chains. Shackles [were] placed round our ankles.”

Standing close to the spot where his ordeal began, not far from the northern Nigerian city of Zaria, Christian man Solomon Ako, 33, told Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) what happened when militants descended on his village in northern Nigeria and kidnapped him.

His voice quaking with emotion, Solomon explained how he and other hostages were held for hours at a time up to their necks in cold water.

Solomon’s story is one of countless many recorded by ACN as the charity assessed the scale of human rights violations against Christians.

Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2024-26 provides first-hand testimony, case studies, country, regional and global analysis investigating the extent to which Christians are targeted around the world. Even before the two-year period covered in this report, there were signs that the oppression of Christians was increasing. The latest data from Pew Research Center indicates that anti-Christian harassment ranging from verbal abuse to killings occurred in 165 countries in 2023, up from 160 in 2021.[1] By this measure, Christians suffered harassment in more countries than any other group, with the gap between Christians and other faiths widening when the harassment of religious groups was already at an all-time high. Speaking at the United Nations in Geneva in March 2026, Archbishop Ettore Balestrero, the Holy See’s Permanent Observer, said “Christians are subjected to physical violence, subjugation, false detention, the expropriation of their property, enslavement, forced exile and even murder because of their religious beliefs.” According to research by ACN, around 220 million Christians are directly exposed to persecution, which encompasses the sort of violations described above by the archbishop.

This edition of *Persecuted and Forgotten?* assesses the situation in 18 countries where religious freedom violations against Christians are of particular concern. The review period ran from 1st August 2024 to 30th June 2026 and assessed whether the religious freedom landscape for Christians had worsened since 2022-24.

Persecuted and Forgotten? 2024-26 found that in just over half (55 percent) of the countries surveyed, oppression against Christians had worsened since the last report. In many, if not most cases, this deterioration affected specific regions rather than entire countries. The report uncovered factors which explain why persecution and oppression have worsened not only in individual countries but across continents.

Global findings

The report’s global findings are as follows:

Oppression of Christians by authoritarian regimes has grown to unprecedented levels in countries with global or regional influence where anti-West sentiment has surged.

- In China, repression has intensified as authorities aligned religious doctrine more closely with communist principles causing mass detentions, jailing clergy on legal technicalities, closing churches and controlling online religious content.
- In Iran, arrests of Christians doubled within 12 months as crackdowns intensified.
- In Nicaragua, the regime increased its crackdown on Christians, arresting and exiling clergy, preventing ordinations, seizing Church institutions and preventing people entering the country with Bibles.



Image © Ismael Martínez Sánchez / ACN

Christians have been increasingly branded "unwanted aliens" in countries where religio-nationalism is to blame for increasing oppression, violent incidents and the weaponisation of legislation against minorities.

- In India, an increase in states adopting "anti-conversion" laws was linked to a rise in attacks on Christians — with reports of extremists burning Christmas decorations, and Christians being prevented from burying their dead or even being forced to exhume the bodies of loved ones.
- In Pakistan, increasingly influential Islamist groups framed minorities as a demographic threat, resulting in endemic abuse of Christian minorities, notably girls and young women forced to convert and marry.

Christians from coast to coast across Sub-Saharan Africa are at risk amid the worst hyper-extremist attacks since the height of the Daesh (ISIS) violence in the Middle East.

- Six of the top 10 countries in the 2026 Global Terrorism Index were in Africa (see below), with the threat having spread from Africa's east coast to its western shores.[2]
- In Mozambique, Islamist militants openly declared their intent to establish a caliphate with reports of 1,000 Christians killed in Cabo Delgado since 2017 — beheadings, kidnapping of children as well as churches and homes torched.
- In Burkina Faso, amid reports that at least 40 percent of the country is controlled by Islamists, some Christians have been forced to follow Islamist customs including dress code, while others were summarily executed.

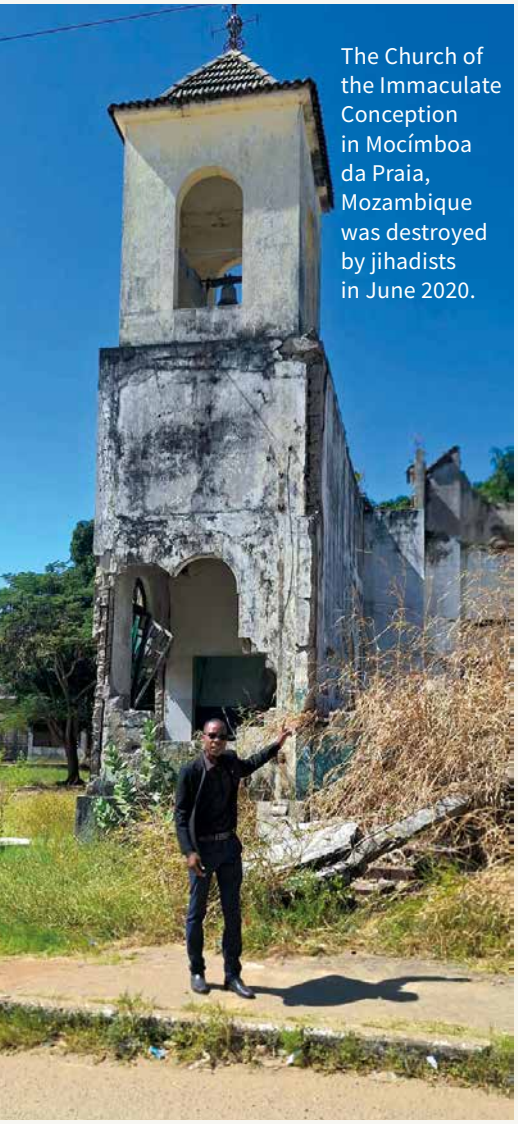
Millions of Christians are part of a mass exodus of those displaced in conflict zones, some of it religiously motivated. This has spread, turning entire swathes of countries in Africa and Asia into danger zones.

- In Nigeria, at least 1 million Christians were among the more than 3.5 million internally displaced as



A garden is tended in the grounds of this ruined church in Vietnam.

Image: Quang Nguyen Vinh / via Pexels



The Church of the Immaculate Conception in Mocímboa da Praia, Mozambique was destroyed by jihadists in June 2020.



entire communities fled towns and villages amid exponential violence, especially in the north/Middle Belt. Bandits, ethnic groups and jihadists have attacked Christian and other faith groups, prompting criticism of government for its failure to uphold the rule of law.

- In Sudan, accusations of war crimes and brutal Islamist oppression have been reported as the country faces the world's largest displacement crisis. After more than three years, the civil war has so far resulted in the damage or destruction of more than 100 churches.

A global context marked by conflict and political upheaval in the Middle East has heightened fears for the survival of Christianity in core parts of its ancient heartland.

- In Syria, at a time of continued upheaval, following the downfall of the Assad regime, leading clerics publicly warned of a possible existential threat to the Church amid reports its Christian population had declined by more than 80 percent since 2011.
- In southern Lebanon, attacks caused a mass exodus of people and destruction of Church properties, causing Christian communities to become ghost towns.

Africa

Christian persecution in Africa has increased — with six of the 10 countries most affected by terrorism in the Global Terrorism Index 2026 found on the continent. Burkina Faso (2nd), Niger (3rd), Nigeria (4th), Mali (5th) Somalia (7th) and Democratic Republic of Congo (8th) indicate that the Sahel region is now at the epicentre, signalling a geographical shift and a concerning trend in global terrorism. Cameroon and Mozambique are also in the top 20.[3] Christian communities in these countries have been disproportionately impacted, as they are for the most part targeted by jihadist groups or caught in broader patterns of sectarian and communal violence.

The countries most affected — especially Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger — contain significant Christian populations, often living alongside Muslim majorities. Groups linked to Islamic State and



Msepera Ujam with her child in an IDP camp in Guma, Nigeria. Extremist Fulani herdsmen killed her husband and smeared his blood all over her body “as a warning”.



Jihadists destroyed the icon of Jesus and St Mary in St George’s Melkite Church when they seized the Syrian shrine town of Maaloula.

Al-Qaeda affiliates (such as JNIM) have expanded rapidly across the Sahel and surrounding regions. These groups operate across borders, making them difficult to contain and increasing the regional spread of violence.

In fragile states where governance is weak, extremist groups exploit religious divisions to advance their agendas.[4] In regions such as northern Nigeria and the central Sahel, terrorist groups have attacked churches, clergy, and Christian villages. Kidnappings, murders and beheadings are not uncommon. This has contributed to the perception — and often the reality — of Christians being specifically vulnerable within a wider conflict environment.

Terrorist violence has driven millions from their homes and Christian communities, particularly those in rural or border regions, have experienced displacement, loss of livelihoods, and destruction of religious infrastructure, including churches and schools. Persistent attacks undermine the ability of Christians to worship safely and engender fears that violence and displacement could lead to long-term changes in the religious composition of affected regions.[5]

Many terrorist attacks are tied to local grievances, including ethnic or communal disputes, which extremists exploit to recruit fighters and expand their influence.[6]

Middle East

Conflict dominated the region as the ramifications of Hamas’s 7th October 2023 attack on Israel continued to reverberate. Israeli operations in Gaza killed or displaced thousands, with the Holy Family and Saint Porphyrius churches serving as sanctuaries for those Christians fleeing the violence.[7] The conflict also spread into Lebanon following Israeli strikes on the Iranian-backed militant group Hezbollah. The tensions in the region were further inflamed by the US-Iran war in February 2026.[8]

In Syria, the long-running civil war ended with the defeat of Bashar Al-Assad, and the installation of the former Islamist Jihadist commander from Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Ahmed Hussein Al-Sharaa as president. In the aftermath of Assad’s downfall, attacks against minority communities increased, especially the Alawites and Druze minorities. Christians have

been targeted, with a devastating suicide attack on Mar Elias Church in Damascus that left 23 dead, and 65 injured.[9] It was the largest single attack on Christians since the 1860 Damascus Massacre.[10] So far, it has been difficult to ascertain the impact of these acts of violence on the Christian community in Syria as a whole.[11]

Islamist militias and non-state actors remain a malign influence in the region, harassing and attacking minority Christian communities. Some progress has been made in disarming militias, particularly in Iraq, where two of the most powerful Shi'a groups in the Popular Mobilisation Force (PMF) have said they will hand their weapons over to the state.[12] However, from Lebanon to Iraq, and Syria, militias continue to play a destabilising role in the Middle East.

Conflict also renewed fears among Christian communities about whether their future in the region is sustainable. Israeli operations against Hezbollah have emptied Christian towns along the Israel-Lebanon border. At least one million people have been displaced across the country.[13] Iran's latest attack on US bases in Iraq near Erbil's Christian quarter has also raised fears of a new exodus, with Church leaders questioning whether Christian families will remain amid the violence.[14]

Legal and administrative restrictions against Christians continue across much of the region. In Egypt, home to the Middle East's largest Christian community, reports continued of Christian women and girls being kidnapped for forced conversion and marriage. At the same time, the authorities have taken some positive steps to allow Christians to renovate and build churches although these measures have not been applied consistently.[15] Conversely, in Turkey, Christians continue to face sustained pressure through legal and administrative restrictions. Turkish authorities have made it difficult to build new churches, reflecting a wider pattern of state-led suppression carried out through legalistic means rather than overt violence.

Overall, conflict and instability continue to be a significant threat to the Christian presence in the Middle East, which could lead to further displacement of Christian communities.

Asia

State authoritarianism continues to threaten religious freedom in parts of Asia, driving repression, discrimination and persecution. In North Korea and China, Christianity is not infrequently seen as a harmful western influence threatening national cohesion. In North Korea basic Christian activities, such as possessing a Bible or participating in worship, can lead to arrest. Estimates suggest Christians represent a significant proportion of the up to 190,000 prisoners thought to be held in jail or labour camps. In China, repression escalated as authorities sought to align doctrine with Communist Party principles. There are reports of mass detentions, clerics jailed on legal technicalities and closure of places of worship, while new laws allow tighter control over online religious content. Vietnam presents a more mixed picture: the older Communist patterns of restrictive control are still present, but vie with the view that religious freedom has constructive value within a socialist society. Nevertheless, ethnic Christian communities in the highlands still face harsh persecution. China and Vietnam both regulate the appointment of leaders in registered religious groups.

In India, nationalism rather than communism has led to authoritarianism entering the religious sphere. Despite increasingly restrictive legislation (e.g. "anti-conversion laws"), the biggest problem remains social hostility. India saw over 700 incidents of anti-Christian violence in 2025, driven in part by rhetoric from Hindutva nationalist groups stressing that growing minority groups have diminished the Hindu population. In Pakistan, groups such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik also frame minorities as a demographic threat, helping drive abuses including the abduction, forced conversion and marriage of girls and young women. In both countries, Christians and other religious minorities face attacks ranging from physical assaults to disruption of worship.

Recent incidents apparently indicate a pattern of church buildings being specifically targeted as part of hostilities against Christians. In Pakistan's Punjab Province, in January 2026, the church in Ghanekey village had its cross desecrated, and Bibles and hymn books torn up.[16] In India, state authorities have been implicated in attempts to destroy churches. In June 2025 Maharashtra State government announced plans to demolish churches[17] it considered to be "unauthorised." Shiloh Church of Christ in Pune was marked for demolition in April 2026.[18] Similarly, church buildings have been targeted during attacks on believers in Laos,[19] and in Burma (Myanmar) the junta has bombed places of worship as part of its campaign against those opposing its rule.





Left: The Church of the Assumption, built in 1894, was destroyed by the Burmese junta in January 2023. The historic church in Chan Thar was significant to the Catholic community: Archbishop Joseph U Win the very first indigenous bishop had been baptised there as a child at the turn of the twentieth century, and numerous priests and nuns were nurtured in their faith there as they grew up.

Above: Pope Leo XIV praying the Regina Cæli in St Peter's Square on 11th May 2025, just days after he was elected.

Conclusion

Receiving an ACN delegation in October 2025, Pope Leo XIV declared that religious freedom is "a cornerstone of any just society for it safeguards the moral space in which conscience may be informed and exercised".[20] The Pontiff went further, stating: "Religious freedom, therefore, is not merely a legal right or a privilege to us granted by governments; it is a foundational condition that makes reconciliation possible."

The fundamental precepts of religious freedom are set out in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document the Pope hailed in his encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* as "one of the highest expressions of human conscience of our time".[21] Article 18 guarantees the right to religious freedom — and to manifest your beliefs either alone or in community, in private or public, through worship, teaching and observance.[22]

The evidence cited in *Persecuted and Forgotten? 2024-26* demonstrates not only that Article 18 is ignored in many parts of the world but that many of the worst violations are against Christians. Indeed, the scale and severity of Christian persecution today amounts to a human rights catastrophe, one that is worsening in many places. That this should come as a surprise to so many reflects the prevailing view in the West which presumes that most Christians are to be found in the northern hemisphere where their faith is accepted — or even part of the culture — and where there are no significant obstacles to its practice. The reality, however, is that most Christians live in the less wealthy global south and are scattered widely in cultures increasingly hostile to them. Amid a rise in nationalism, extremism and anti-Western sentiment they are frequently seen as unwanted aliens in their own countries. Rarely is religious animosity the sole driver of acts of hatred towards Christians. Mostly it forms part of a matrix of factors which can include ethnicity, access to resources, poverty and politics. The lack of religious literacy in the West is such that anti-Christian animus is frequently downplayed in favour of other factors. Hence a skewed understanding of the human rights context often exacerbates an already critical situation for persecuted Christians.

ACN remains committed to religious freedom and helping persecuted Christians. Solomon Ako, the man from northern Nigeria kidnapped and repeatedly assaulted after he refused to abandon his Christian faith, told ACN that in the depths of his suffering what kept him strong was knowing that there were people around the world, praying for him, speaking up and advocating his cause. He said: "Every night when our kidnappers were asleep, we prayed. We prayed knowing that we were not alone, that there were people like you who would never abandon us. That was what kept us strong then and that is what keeps us strong now."

Image: Cristian Gennari

COUNTRY PROFILE

BURKINA FASO



In 2026, Burkina Faso was ranked second in the Global Terrorism Index, having held first or second place since 2023.[23] Once considered a model of inter-religious harmony in West Africa, it has sharply deteriorated since Islamist attacks began in 2015. Initially infiltrating the north from neighbouring Mali, extremist groups linked to transnational jihadi networks — including the local Islamic State group and Al-Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) — have extended their presence to every region except the south. The Islamists are also involved with organised crime, such as drug trafficking, smuggling and illegal mining.[24]

Now one of the main epicentres of jihadist violence in the Sahel, militant groups control at least 40 percent of the country,[25] mostly in rural areas. They often coerce villagers to follow Islamic customs, making women veil their faces in public and men grow beards. Those who refuse are expelled or even publicly executed. Where insurgents allow Christians to practise their faith, this is restricted to inside churches, and it cannot be taught to children.[26] A local source told ACN: "Sometimes the Christians are permitted to pray, but just as quickly they can be subjected to abuse, to make them flee."[27]

Islamist violence has targeted both military and civilian populations, including religious communities.[28] As part of the jihadists' attempt to impose their own extremist ideology, Christians have been consistently singled out, with churches attacked and believers summarily executed. It is very difficult to provide reliable figures, but between May and August 2024, around 100 Christians were reported killed in the Zekuy-Doumbala pastoral region.[29] While Christians are not the only group to suffer, nevertheless the Islamist terrorists display a clear animus against the faith.

SELECTED INCIDENTS

AUGUST 2024 On Sunday 25th, JNIM extremists killed 26 men from Sanaba village in Nouna Diocese. Insurgents separated out all males over 12 years who were Christians (Catholics and Protestants), practitioners of traditional religions or those thought hostile to jihadist ideology. They were taken to the nearby Protestant church and their throats cut. In the following days, jihadists targeted three nearby Catholic parishes close to the border with Mali, triggering the flight of around 5,000 women and children to Nouna.

JANUARY 2025 Four catechists from Ouakara parish were ambushed near Bondokuy while returning from a training session on Saturday 25th. The group was travelling on two motorcycles: those on the first motorcycle fled into the forest, but the other two were murdered.

AUGUST 2025 Women in a parish in Pibaoré formed a human shield to protect their priest, after he was attacked during Mass. Bishop Théophile Naré of Kaya said "This heroic act was not picked up by the media, but it remains an important symbol of faith and solidarity".[30]

OCTOBER 2025 A catechist from Kouala commune in Fada N'Gourma Diocese was kidnapped during Mass on Sunday 5th. A local source told ACN: "He was specifically targeted. The goal is to spread fear among the Christians." He was subsequently released.[31]

COUNTRY PROFILE

BURMA (MYANMAR)



Image: Scotted400

In February 2026, Burma entered the sixth year of the civil war that followed the military junta coup. The military continues to perpetrate serious human rights violations including attacks on religious sites, such as the Church of the Sacred Heart — intended to be the cathedral for the new Diocese of Mindat — which was bombed in February 2025.[32] Initially such attacks seemed to echo the targeting of ethnic Christian churches that occurred under pre-2011 military rule,[33] but quickly encompassed all religious groups. Despite the military's association with Buddhist nationalism,[34] a significant number of Buddhist places of worship have been targeted,[35] including an airstrike on Sein Yadanar Monastery in March 2025.[36] While accurate figures are difficult to obtain, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) stated that 379 religious sites were destroyed — and 259 clerics and civilians in them killed — in 2025.[37] The Burma Research Institute estimated 343 Christian churches or buildings were attacked by junta soldiers from the start of the war until the end of 2025.[38]

There is a history of discrimination against religious minorities in this predominantly Buddhist country which has fluctuated over the years. The Civil War has had varied effects: in some areas Buddhist extremism has grown, elsewhere the opposite is true as the junta's cruel treatment of the population has promoted solidarity among different groups irrespective of ethnicity or religion. In isolated incidents, ministers of religion have been kidnapped or even killed. Rev'd Pau Muan Lian was seized before being forcibly conscripted in November 2025.[39]

SELECTED INCIDENTS

FEBRUARY 2025 Less than a fortnight after it was chosen as the cathedral of the newly created Mindat Diocese, the Sacred Heart Church in Mindat, Chin State, was left in ruins by airstrikes. Attacks on the compound had been ongoing since the beginning of December 2024.

MARCH 2025 Junta soldiers torched St Patrick's Cathedral in Banmaw, Kachin State, on the evening of 16th March — the day before the cathedral was scheduled to celebrate the feast of its patron sant. Over the previous weeks soldiers had destroyed other buildings in the cathedral complex including the presbytery, diocesan offices and a school.[40]

DECEMBER 2025 Junta authorities ordered churches in Kachin State to hold Christmas celebrations before 20th December to avoid conflicting with elections scheduled for 28th of the month.[41]

FEBRUARY 2026 The World Council of Churches condemned a junta air strike on the predominantly Christian village of Tlangkhua in Chin State on Tuesday 10th. A missile hit near the new church building which was still under construction and most victims were members of the Mennonite Church. Among the dead were its deacon, treasurer and two youth leaders; and eleven other church members needed emergency medical treatment.[42]

MARCH 2026 Politician and human-rights activist Dr Sasa went on record, saying Christians in Chin State are second-class citizens, and experience problems accessing education and healthcare. He also highlighted historic atrocities committed by junta soldiers, including the rape of Chin Christian women.[43]

COUNTRY PROFILE

CHINA



A wave of arrests of Christians started in late 2025 and continued into early 2026, targeting unregistered organisations such the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, central China.[44] Legally Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism and Taoism are recognised religions and their followers are permitted to practise under the auspices of one of the state sanctioned 'patriotic associations' which seeks to control religion in line with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) principles. But many Christians refuse to accept this. According to USCIRF: "Religious leaders and community members who refuse to submit to the CCP's intrusive system of control face harassment, fines, detention, political re-education, forced labour, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, torture, and other abuse."[45]

Even for approved churches there are legal restrictions, for example, the 2018 Regulations on Religious Affairs restrict faith activity. A growing number of provinces including Henan and Xinjiang prohibit anyone under 18 from participating in worship. The September 2025 Online Code of Conduct for Religious Personnel made publishing religious content online without a "special licence" illegal. It banned live-streaming liturgies, prayer meetings, and religious instruction for children, and online preaching on unlicensed websites. Only state-registered denominations are allowed websites. All online activity must demonstrate "support for the leadership of the Communist Party of China".[46]

SELECTED INCIDENTS

DECEMBER 2024 Underground Catholic Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin of Wenzhou was fined ¥200,000 — equivalent to US$27,000 — for celebrating Mass. The Friday 27th service for the start of the Jubilee Year of Hope, which was not 'legally authorised', was attended by 200 people. In March 2025 he was detained for several days after not paying the fine.[47]

MARCH 2025 China gave 15-day sentences to two members of the Wheatseed Reform Church in the eastern Anhui Province for "using cult activities to endanger society." They refused to join the government-backed Three-Self Patriotic Movement.[48]

JUNE 2025 Pastors Li Jie, Elder Han Xiaodong and Wang Qiang from the underground Linfen Covenant Home Church in Shanxi Province received prison sentences on Friday 20th for "fraud" at a secret trial.[49]

OCTOBER 2025 At least 30 leading members of the underground Zion Church were seized including its founder Rev'd Jin Mingri. He was taken from his home in Beihai, Guangxi Region on "suspicion of the illegal use of information networks". Members were also arrested in Shanghai, Beijing, Zhejiang, Guangxi, Shandong, Sichuan and Henan. The community had about 5,000 members in almost 50 cities who heard sermons via Zoom and gathered in small groups. The arrests followed the introduction of the new Online Code of Conduct for Religious Personnel.[50] Twelve members were still detained at the end of January 2026.

JANUARY 2026 Authorities demolished part of the unregistered Yayang Church's building in Wenzhou. This followed the arrest of around 100 of its members between 13th and 18th December 2025.[51]

MAY 2026 Authorities arrested six Christians in Kaili City, Guizhou Province for organising a Sunday school and other Church activities for children.[52]

CASE STUDY

HIS CRIME – SELLING HYMN BOOKS



Father Ma Xianshi, a senior priest in China's state-approved Catholic Patriotic Association, was put on trial in November 2025 for selling hymn books.

The hymn book in question was *Tianlu Miaoyin* (Heavenly Melodies). It is a legally approved publication, licensed by the Chinese Communist Party's Zhejiang Religious Department. *Tianlu Miaoyin* is used throughout the provinces of Jiangsu, Shanghai and Fujian, as well as Zhejiang.

The book was being sold in a Catholic bookshop run by layman Zhuang Qiantuan in Yiwu city, Zhejiang Province. State prosecutors alleged the book was being sold illegally, as religious publications can only be distributed within faith communities. Mr Qiantuan was also charged and pleaded guilty.

Father Ma was responsible for sales as the administrator of the state church in Wenzhou Diocese.* He was appointed to run the diocese in September 2016 after the death of his Bishop Vincent Zhu Wei-Fang. Bishop Peter Shao Zumin, the coadjutor bishop, should have automatically taken over, but state authorities doubted his loyalty to the Communist Party. Prior to Father Ma's arrest in November 2024, he was also vice president of Zhejiang Province's Catholic Affairs Committee.

Local sources suggested Father Ma fell from favour for resisting the imposition of a government bishop in Wenzhou Diocese — which would be canonically irregular — and allegedly having met Vatican officials, without prior Communist Party permission, during a pilgrimage to Rome.

His trial was originally set for 1st July 2025 at Yiwu City Court, but three days earlier, after more than 300 Catholics from Wenzhou asked to attend the proceeding, the court postponed the trial to a later date.

* Wenzhou Diocese is part of the Ecclesiastical Province of Hangzhou which roughly mirrors the borders of Zhejiang Province.

It finally took place on 13th November 2025. Catholics who registered to be present were allegedly pressured or threatened to deter them from attending. Only two registered attendees turned up: diocesan priests who were accompanied by government officials throughout proceedings. However, a number of Catholics who had not registered in advance also attended, leading authorities to open an adjacent courtroom with live video feed so they could follow the hearing. Father Ma blessed the parishioners who turned up to support him before he left the court.

Father Ma denied any wrongdoing, stating that the sale of the book was a pastoral duty. When prosecutors stated 50,000 copies had been sold generating ¥1.5 million, he stressed he had received no personal benefit from the sale.

No verdict was announced until June 2026 when it emerged he had been found guilty and sentenced to 18 months in jail. But in a surprise move he was released early on 22nd July.

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Image: 小雨 賽賽 / via Pexels

COUNTRY PROFILE

EGYPT



Families still report girls being abducted, forced to convert to Islam and coerced into marriage — particularly in Upper Egypt. Islamic institutions, including Al-Azhar,[53] and police have been accused of complicity. Comprehensive figures are hard to come by, but more than 30 kidnapping cases were documented in 2024.[54]

In Upper Egypt, communities also suffered violent attacks and authorities often fail to hold perpetrators to account.[55] Customary reconciliation, a parallel system for ending disputes, is often used in these situations, but this system penalises Christians, who have been pressured to accept the will of the majority community (see October 2025).

Despite serious ongoing problems, positive signs continue to be seen in the largest Christian community in the Arab world, e.g. in December 2024, the Ministry of Justice and Egypt's five officially recognised Christian denominations signed the long-awaited draft of the Personal Status Law for Christians. Amongst its provisions men and women can inherit equally.

Following criticisms that there were major delays approving new Christian buildings — a power previously restricted to Egypt's president — the 2016 Church Construction Law devolved this authority. As of April 2026, 3,804 out of *c.*5,500 applications had legal recognition.[56] But the legislation has not been universally implemented, and attacks on churches or sites allocated for new ones continue to occur.

SELECTED INCIDENTS

OCTOBER 2024 21-year-old Christian university student Julia Atef disappeared on Sunday 26th on her way to St Mark's Church in Shubra Al-Khayma, Qalyubia Governorate.[57]

NOVEMBER 2024 Three Christians were hosptalised after being attacked by four men wielding swords and machetes in Ashrouba village in Minya Governorate's Beni Mazar District.

FEBRUARY 2025 Three Christian women — Marina Khalaf Greiss, 19, Erini Emil, 17 and Marina Rizk, 20 — disappeared in one week. Greiss and Rizk were subsequently returned to their families, having been forcibly converted and married to their abductors.[58]

JULY 2025 Authorities arrested Russian Orthodox convert Saeid Mansour Abdulraziq on multiple charges, including terrorism, after he requested his identification papers be changed to show his religion as Christian instead of Muslim.[59] His June 2026 trial was adjourned.

OCTOBER 2025 Muslim villagers pelted Christian properties with stones and kindled fires on Christian-owned farmland in Nazlet Jalf, Beni Mazar, Minya Province. The attacks occurred on Tuesday 23rd, after rumours of a relationship between a Christian teenager and a Muslim girl circulated online. At a reconciliation session the following day, the Christian teenager's grandfather was fined E£1 million (*c.*US$18,240) and the family told to sell their home and leave the village. The teenager was detained, pending investigation by the public prosecutor into his relationship.[60]

FEBRUARY 2026 Without prior notice, Central Security Forces bulldozed a Christian compound including a wooden chapel in 15th-of-May City on Tuesday 3rd. Official permission for a new church to be built there had been sought and the community was raising funds after officials verbally encouraged the project. Tear gas was used to disperse Christians who clashed with officers overseeing the demolition. It was subsequently claimed the demolition was triggered by the compound's walls encroaching on neighbouring land, due to a builders' error.[61]

CASE STUDY

ABDUCTED, CONVERTED AND KEPT FROM HER FAMILY



When Samah Ageeb disappeared in December 2025 the Christian community in Girga District was outraged — saying she was the fifth Christian woman to disappear there that year. Samah — a 27-year-old married woman with a seven-year-old son — was abducted after getting into a tuk-tuk taxi in Bandar Al-Gharbiya village on Tuesday, 9th December 2025.

After filing a missing persons report, her family received an unexpected phone call saying Samah had converted to Islam and was currently at the Suez Security Directorate, around 380 miles away from Girga. The Suez Security Directorate is the police force's regional command centre, which oversees law enforcement, security and public safety in the Suez Governorate.

A group of family and neighbours made the gruelling 10-hour journey to Suez. The family was under the impression that Samah would be allowed to leave with them, and when they arrived, her brother, along with her elderly father and mother, were allowed to go in to see Samah.

According to reports from the family, Samah seemed heavily medicated and her speech was often incoherent. She had been dressed in a Muslim niqab, and when they lifted the veil her face was bruised — leading them to think she had been beaten. At the end of the meeting, Samah clung to her mother and begged to return home, but authorities removed her by force.

Officers then asked her brother to sign a "non-interference" pledge, promising that he would not seek to return Samah to her family. He refused, insisting that his sister was being coerced. Following a heated exchange with officers, he was detained for several hours. Neighbours allege that he was tortured during his detention.

Her father was also asked to undergo a DNA test to prove his paternity, which he did. Security finally filed a report on Samah's behalf against her family, ending their hopes that she would be released.

With Samah still being held, a series of protests started in Girga. Located on the Nile's west bank in Sohag Governorate, Girga District has a sizeable Christian population. According to local tradition, Girga takes its name from a long-gone monastery dedicated to St George — or as he is known in Egypt, Mar Girgis. Protestors emphasised that Samah was the fifth Christian woman to disappear from Girga in 2025.

Samah's parents appealed to President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi for their daughter's return, and supporters launched a global campaign publicising her case.

They were successful and by the end of December Samah had been reunited with her family. But her story raises a multitude of questions about the vulnerable situation of Christian women and the role played by authorities in their abductions.

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Image: Earl Andre Roca / via Pexels



“As refugees [in Sudan], we feel valueless. Most of us women have been raped and sexually abused. We left our country [Eritrea] to look for a better life. But then we are left with a child of which we do not know the father. And we have to live in these camps for a long time.”

COUNTRY PROFILE

ERITREA



Image: Magdalena Wolnik

"Religious repression continued unabated" according to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker in 2025. He expressed particular concern about "the prolonged arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance of religious leaders and people of faith, some of whom have been detained for over 20 years".[62]

The government officially recognises the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, and Tewahedo Eritrean Orthodox Churches in addition to Sunni Islam. It also appoints Muslim and Orthodox leaders, controlling their activities and finances, while the smaller Catholic and Lutheran communities have much more freedom in these matters. Decree 73 prohibits spiritual leaders and religious media from commenting on politics. It also obliges Churches carrying out social initiatives to support state schemes.[63] Since 2019, Catholic social initiatives, including schools and hospitals, have been appropriated by the state, with Church staff who resisted these measures having faced intimidation, detention and enforced disappearance.[64] Registered Churches can also face other issues — such as forced military conscription of clerics.

All other groups are supposed to register with the Office of Religious Affairs or stop all activities, but no group has yet managed to successfully complete the complex registration process.[65] Members of these groups, e.g. Pentecostal Christians, are routinely imprisoned and pressured to renounce their beliefs. In mid-2025 it was estimated that perhaps up to 500 Christians from unregistered Evangelical Protestant communities were in detention without charge or trial.[66] However, since the controversial prisoner releases at the end of 2025 (see November-December 2025) there have been no new mass arrests of Christians. Those arrested for religious reasons have been described as living in inhumane conditions at high-security prisons such as Mai Serwa near Asmara, being forced to live in squalor, and facing violence and intimidation.[67] Clerics from state-recognised Churches have also been jailed, including Orthodox priest Gebremedhin Gebregergis, who was seized in November 2004.[68]

SELECTED INCIDENTS

JULY 2024 A report found at least 218 Christians had been arrested over the past year, many of whom were women and children, bringing the number of Christians in prison to around 400.[69]

JANUARY 2025 Authorities detained 44 Christians including 27 teenagers attending a prayer service held in a private home in Asmara.[70]

AUGUST 2025 The #Voices4Justice campaign called for the release of seven Christian leaders arrested in 2004 and 2005, and not formally charged. A dozen organisations and more than 70 individuals signed a letter taken to the Eritrean embassy in the USA's capital Washington, DC calling for the release of the Evangelical and Orthodox ministers. The embassy refused to accept the letter.[71]

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2025 177 Christians were freed. But their release was conditional on signing a document stating they had illegally joined a proscribed denomination and promising not to participate in unregistered church activities again — taking full responsibility for any subsequent punishment if they did.[72]

COUNTRY PROFILE

INDIA



Image © Ismael Martínez Sánchez / ACN

2025 saw over 700 incidents of anti-Christian violence including disruption of worship, physical assault and vandalism of churches — a decline from 814 in 2024[73] — with nearly 50 of these occurring over Advent and Christmas. In Assam's Nalbari District, Hindutva extremists burned Christmas decorations at St Mary's School on Christmas Eve and smashed festive items in local shops.[74] In Kerala's Palakkad District, children singing carols were assaulted and their instruments destroyed.[75]

Allegations of forced or duplicitous conversions to Christianity help drive attacks. Rajasthan saw a rise in reported incidents, with over 75 cases by August 2025, after it became the twelfth state to implement a Freedom of Religion Act, or as critics call it an "anti-conversion law", in February 2025. In early 2026, Chhattisgarh[76] and Maharashtra introduced new legislation bringing the number of states to fourteen — both states have a BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) majority in their legislature.

Since the BJP came to power nationally in 2014, Hindutva nationalist group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and affiliated organisations including the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal, have increased their influence. The People's Union for Civil Liberties documented instances of police colluding with Hindutva groups when Christians were attacked.[77]

In tribal regions, Christians were denied burial and even forced to exhume the dead. Over 2024-25 there were 49 cases in Chhattisgarh, 8 in Jharkand, and 6 in Bihar, Karnataka, Odhisa and West Bengal.[78]

SELECTED INCIDENTS

DECEMBER 2024 A VHP mob disrupted a Christmas Day service in Mahuva, Gujarat State claiming the Church needed permission to hold it.

APRIL 2025 Hardliners in Nabarangpur, Odisha State stopped the burial of 21-year-old Saravan Gond on Wednesday 16th, demanding his family convert to Hinduism. After the family refused and buried him on their own land, his mother and 16-year-old sister were assaulted. Residents exhumed and burned the body. The family fled.[79]

JULY 2025 A mob disrupted a communion service in Solapur, Maharashtra State accusing the minister of "distributing blood". Although the pastor explained it was grape juice not blood, members of the mob confiscated it and beat him.[80]

AUGUST 2025 Around 70 members of Bajrang Dal assaulted two Catholic priests, two Sisters and a catechist leaving Gangadhar village, Odisha State, after Mass was celebrated there. They accused them of converting Hindus. Father Jojo, one of the priests, said: "I had only come to celebrate Mass. I never imagined such hostility for such a peaceful and sacred gesture."[81]

JANUARY 2026 Protestant pastor Bipin Bihari Naik was publicly forced to bow before a Hindu temple and chant the praises of the Hindu deity Ram before being paraded with religious symbols. *c.*20 members of Bajrang Dal disrupted a prayer meeting at a private residence in Parjang, Odisha State before beating the pastor. It was alleged he had converted Hindus.[82]

JUNE 2026 26 Christian families were expelled from Bharanda village, Chhattisgarh State for refusing to renounce their faith.[83]

CASE STUDY

DENIED DIGNIFIED BURIAL

A Christian family was told they could not bury their son in the public cemetery unless they renounced their faith. The boy, Ayush Santa — who was variously reported to be 13 or 14 — died of kidney failure. The standoff occurred in Kapena, Odisha State on Saturday 14th February 2026. The boy's father, Krutibas Santa said: "We wanted to bury my son in the village burial ground as we have always done. But some Hindu villagers objected and obstructed us."

The family then tried to bury Ayush on their land just over a mile (less than 2km) outside the village. "Even there, we were stopped. The villagers said Christians cannot be buried in Kapena village or even within the village panchayat [district] limits," said Mr Santa.

Authorities sent more than 40 police officers to the village, but even then the stand-off lasted for several hours. Police mediated a settlement between the two parties. It can hardly be said to have favoured the Christian family. The family signed an agreement that the burial would occur on the family's land, without a Christian service or Christian symbols such as a cross on the grave. The burial took place after midnight, in the presence of police, to prevent escalation. "Finally, Ayush Santa was buried without reverence, dignity of a Christian body and without prayers for his soul," said Bishop Pallab Lima of the Church of North India and head of the ecumenical United Believers Council Network of India.

Kapena is a largely tribal village with around 200 residents, of which more than 30 families belong to the local Pentecostal Church. According to Mr Santa tensions started escalating in January 2026. The church was attacked by a mob on 25th, two Christians were forcibly taken to a temple and assaulted and villagers threatened to expel around 30 Christian families from the village if they did not renounce their faith.

He said that was the beginning of the troubles and subsequently Hindu villagers have demanded the demolition of the existing church. "They told us to find separate land for our church. As per police instructions, one of our members donated a registered land outside the village to construct a prayer house. But the villagers are opposing that as well."

Krutibas Santa said the tension only began after outsiders started coming to the village and whipping up the Hindu villagers against them. "We have been Christians for more than 30 years, even from my grandfather's time. We lived peacefully, participated in village functions, and practiced our faith without conflict. Why are we now denied our right to profess and practise our religion?"

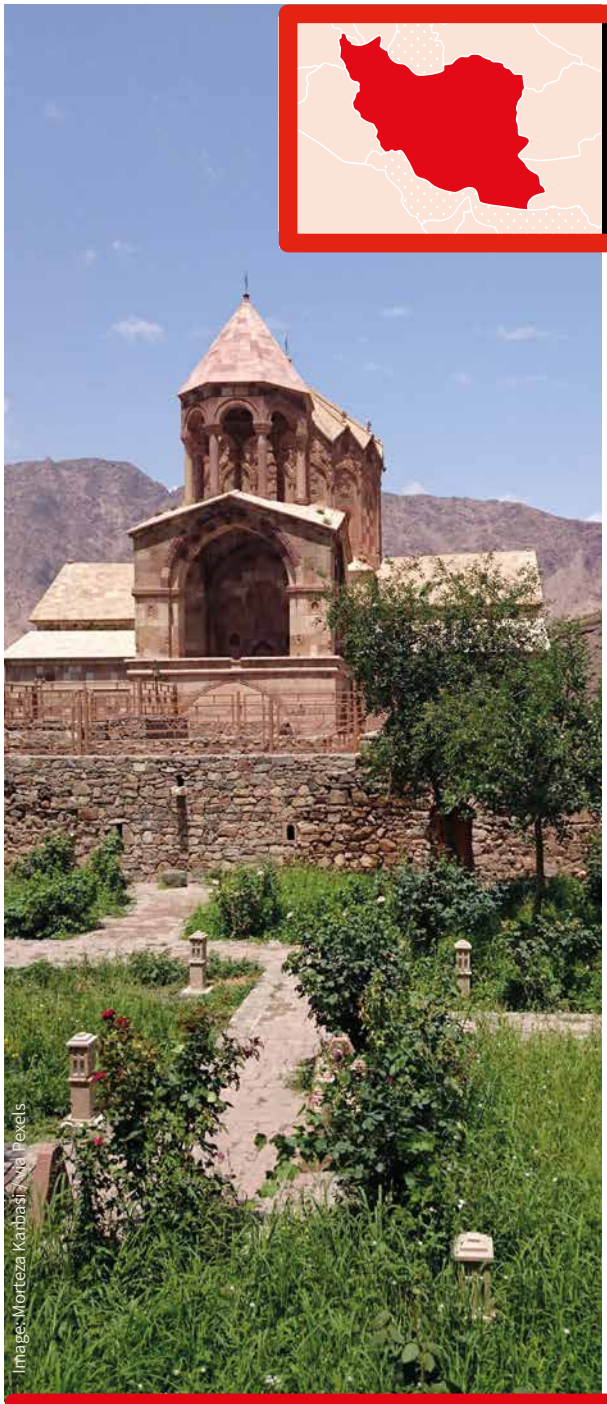
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Image: Brazil Topno / Via Pexels


Image: Morteza Kanbasi Via Pexels

COUNTRY PROFILE

IRAN

The situation in Iran has remained highly volatile with large-scale anti-government demonstrations at the beginning of 2026, reportedly taking place in more than 200 cities.[84] Authorities responded with an extensive security crackdown, including the use of lethal force, resulting in more than 30,000 deaths.[85] These developments, together with the outbreak of the US-Iran War in February 2026, coincided with a deterioration in human rights and further restrictive measures by state authorities.

Iran continues to impose significant restrictions on Christians' religious freedom, particularly converts and members of Evangelical churches. While certain communities, including Roman Catholic and some Orthodox and Protestant denominations, are officially recognised and permitted to conduct worship, they are subject to harassment and intimidation, including a prohibition on reading or distributing the Bible in Farsi.[86] Estimates suggest that there are 300,000 Armenian and Syriac Christians in Iran, with 500,000 — 800,000 worshipping in Protestant house churches.[87] ACN figures suggest the percentage of Christians in Iran has increased, despite state repression.[88]

Conversion from Islam remains unlawful, with individuals accused of apostasy or related activities facing arrest, detention, and imprisonment, frequently based on broadly construed "national security" charges. Evangelical Christians are often linked with "foreign intelligence services", a narrative that paints an entire faith community as a security threat, gravely increasing their vulnerability.[89]

Arrests of Christians increased substantially in 2025, with 254 cases reported — approximately double the number recorded in 2024.[90] This has been accompanied by increasingly severe judicial outcomes, as well as the imposition of ancillary penalties, including exclusion from education, employment and health care.[91] Despite the release of a limited number of individuals detained on religious grounds, the overall pattern indicates a progressive tightening of restrictions on religion, characterised by heightened surveillance, prosecution and punitive measures for conduct deemed inconsistent with the Islamic Republic's laws.

SELECTED INCIDENTS

NOVEMBER 2024 Christian convert Toumaj Ariankia was convicted of "propaganda against the regime by way of evangelising Christianity," "collaboration with hostile powers (Israel, the United Kingdom, and America)," and "membership in groups antagonistic to the regime". His punishment includes a ten-year prison sentence and a two-year ban on "social activities".[92]

MARCH 2025 63-year-old Evangelical convert, Nasser Navard Gol-Tapeh, suffered a stroke in Evin Prison on the 35th day of a hunger strike protesting Iran's persecution of Christians.[93]

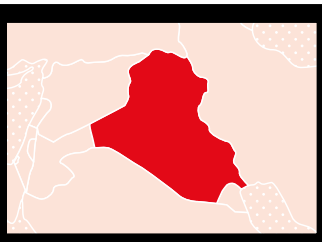
OCTOBER 2025 Mina Khajavi, who was arrested for leading a house church, was released from Evin Prison after completing her sentence. She was reportedly denied medical care for arthritis during her imprisonment.[94]

MAY 2026 Catholic convert Ghazal Marzban was rearrested — having been released in January 2025 after completing one third of her jail term — and sentenced to nine years and eight months for "collusion against national security" among other charges. She was first arrested in November 2024, after protesting harassment following her conversion. During her rearrest her Bible was seized.[95]

JUNE 2026 Six security officers entered St Peter's Evangelical Church, Tehran, during worship, saying they wanted to "identify" attendees. They warned the building would be requisitioned. After a new property deed was issued for the church, stating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps owned it, families living on the site were ordered to leave or face jail.[96]

COUNTRY PROFILE

IRAQ



In 2026, the situation for Iraq's Christians is mixed depending on where they reside in the country. Christians in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) reported lower instances of discrimination and violence. It is estimated that 90 percent of Iraq's Christians now live in the KRI following Daesh (ISIS)'s invasion of the Nineveh plains in 2014.

In February 2026, ACN saw firsthand the steps taken by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to promote coexistence and protect Christians' rights, including tackling hate speech and Islamist extremism. However, across Iraq Christians continue to face discrimination, harassment, and intimidation, as well as poor behaviour from militia groups including the Popular Mobilisation Force, a legalised group of militias with links to Iran.[97] Militia activity continued to be a significant source of concern with Christians reporting harassment and intimidation at checkpoints.[98]

Iraq's Christian population continued to decline during the reporting period, with migration due to the lack of economic opportunity and insecurity being cited as the most common reasons.[99] The late Chaldean Bishop Paul Thabit Mekko of Alqosh said ten years after the Islamic State occupation, fewer than 50 Christian families had returned to Mosul, once home to at least 1,200 Christian families.[100]

Nationally, the estimated Christian population is between 150,000 and 250,000, or 0.3 percent of the population, compared with 0.46 percent of the population in the last reporting period.[101] Christian leaders are concerned numbers could fall further because of the impact of the US-Iran War.[102] Indeed, the district of Ankawa in Erbil has suffered damage, including some church buildings following Iranian missile attacks on western military installations near Erbil airport.[103]

Iraqi law does not provide for conversion from Islam to another religion. This means that converts must register their children as Muslim to obtain documentation for them, which is essential to access public services including school.[104] Converts are also unable to register under their new religion when applying for or renewing their ID cards.

SELECTED INCIDENTS

AUGUST 2024 The UNITAD report on crimes committed by Daesh (ISIS), delivered to the Supreme Judicial Council on Monday 26th, concluded that there are reasonable grounds to believe that international crimes were committed against members of the Christian community in or around Mosul and the Nineveh Plains between 2014 and 2017.[105]

APRIL 2025 An assailant yelled Islamic slogans while waging an axe attack that wounded three Christians taking part in an Assyrian New Year parade in Duhok.[106]

FEBRUARY 2026 Bishop Felix of Zakho, Apostolic Administrator of Al Qosh, said at least 100 Christian families left Alqosh in 2025 due to economic pressure, with around 100 more planning to leave in 2026.[107]

MAY 2026 An Iraqi court ruled in favour of a young Christian woman, Maryam,* allowing her to have her official religious status corrected in the government's database after she was automatically registered as Muslim under Iraqi law.[108]

**Not real name.*

COUNTRY PROFILE

MALI



Persecution of Christians is on the increase in Mali which now ranks fifth globally for terrorist activity behind Pakistan, Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria.[109] The border areas with Niger and Burkina Faso remain the most affected, accounting for nearly 75 percent of all attacks and fatalities in the landlocked country. Roughly 348,000 Christians, of which two-thirds are Catholic, make up 2.2 percent of the population.[110] In the past the relationship between Christians and Muslims was peaceful, but now some Christians face such severe persecution that they are unable to live in large sections of the country.

According to the Center for Preventive Action, the continuing collapse of international counter-terrorism support, as well as weakening leadership in regional efforts, has created a vacuum in which violent extremism is expanding.[111] Islamic extremists target Christians with violence, abductions and church burnings. Evangelical pastors and worshippers are especially vulnerable, often accused of being spies for the West.[112]

The departure of the UN peacekeeping mission, ordered by Mali's junta in June 2023, led to the collapse of a 2015 peace deal with Tuareg separatist rebels. In June 2025 the military government suspended political parties, contributing to fears of growing authoritarianism and political instability.[113]

The government has revoked all educational partnership agreements with the dioceses, leaving many nuns — for whom this was their primary pastoral work — without any means of livelihood. Financial extortion of Christians and physical attacks are also common.

The situation in Mali, which has been under a fuel blockade for months, is now extremely fragile politically, and there is reason to fear a regime change in favour of a "human-centred Islamism" modelled closely on what Syria experienced after Assad's fall, but this time with grave consequences for the Catholic Church. If Mali falls under the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology it could mean the collapse of all AES (Alliance of Sahel States) governments and would have security implications for neighbouring countries.[114]

SELECTED INCIDENTS

AUGUST 2024 After Islamists seized control, Church leaders in Mopti were summoned to a meeting and given a week to accept Islamist rules or leave. The imposed rules included: all Christians including pastors to convert to Islam and help wage jihadic war; all men aged between 18 and 40 pay 5,000 CFA francs (US$8.70) each year; and both men and women dressing according to Islamic law.[115]

OCTOBER 2024 Jihadists imposed a jizya tax of 25,000 CFA francs (US$43.50) on adult Christians in Douna-Pen village, threatening church closures if they refused or could not pay.[116]

JANUARY 2025 Catholic schools faced uncertainty after the government announced subsidies covering 80 percent of teachers' salaries would be ended. Church leaders warned the loss of funding for the schools that teach students from different religions together could undermine efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and peace.[117]

NOVEMBER 2025 The Bishops' Conference of Mali cancelled the 54th National Marian Pilgrimage to Kita due to jihadist group Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin's blockade of the capital, Bamako.[118]



COUNTRY PROFILE

MOZAMBIQUE

Christians in Mozambique, particularly in Cabo Delgado Province, faced severe persecution including murders, abductions, and destruction of churches as Islamic State-affiliated militants seized the region.[119] The rise of extremism has had devastating consequences on Christian communities where militants seek to establish an Islamic caliphate and to gain control over mineral resources in the region. The presence of Christians is seen as an obstacle to that goal.[120]

The country has experienced a steady decline in security and fundamental rights, becoming one of the world's most terrorism-affected countries.[121] Despite military intervention from Rwanda and neighbouring countries, violence continues.[122] Apart from the region around the international liquefied natural gas project in Afungi, state and foreign security forces appear unable to protect the local population effectively against attacks by insurgents. A lack of secure funding has led the Rwandan army to threaten to withdraw its troops, which would significantly exacerbate the situation.

Islamists have killed more than 1,000 Christians across Cabo Delgado since the beginning of an insurgency in October 2017.[123] According to an April 2025 statement from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), the goal of Islamists is to ultimately install *Shari'a* law in the nation.[124] Islamic State Mozambique "seeks to violently overthrow the Mozambican Government and expel foreign influences," the DNI stated. "The branch demands governance by *Shari'a* and rejects secular education."

SELECTED INCIDENTS

AUGUST 2025 Children were kidnapped in attacks in Cabo Delgado that caused thousands of people to flee. Almost 60,000 people were displaced in a fortnight. Father Kwiriwi Fonseca from Pemba Diocese told ACN: "This aimless war only kills, kills, kills, and takes away the little hope that the people — especially the children — had. These children must be returned, they must be sought wherever they are, to be returned to their parents because these children deserve to dream, these children deserve to have a better future."[125]

NOVEMBER 2025 Four Christians were killed and one beheaded in a spate of jihadist attacks in Nampula, northern Mozambique. From the 10th to 17th, settlements were attacked and hundreds of houses torched, causing thousands of people to flee. At least two chapels were destroyed. There were reports of terrorists kidnapping people, including women and children.[126]

FEBRUARY 2026 Two Christians were captured and slain by Islamists in Cabo Delgado. Islamic State Mozambique claimed the killings in a social media post. The two Christians were taken as they travelled towards Congreso, Macomia District.[127]

APRIL 2026 A historic church near Meza, Cabo Delgado was reduced to a shell after an attack by jihadists.[128] Armed militants entered the compound of St Louis de Montfort Church in Minhoene at approximately 4pm on Thursday 30th, setting fire to the church, offices, and the missionaries' residence.

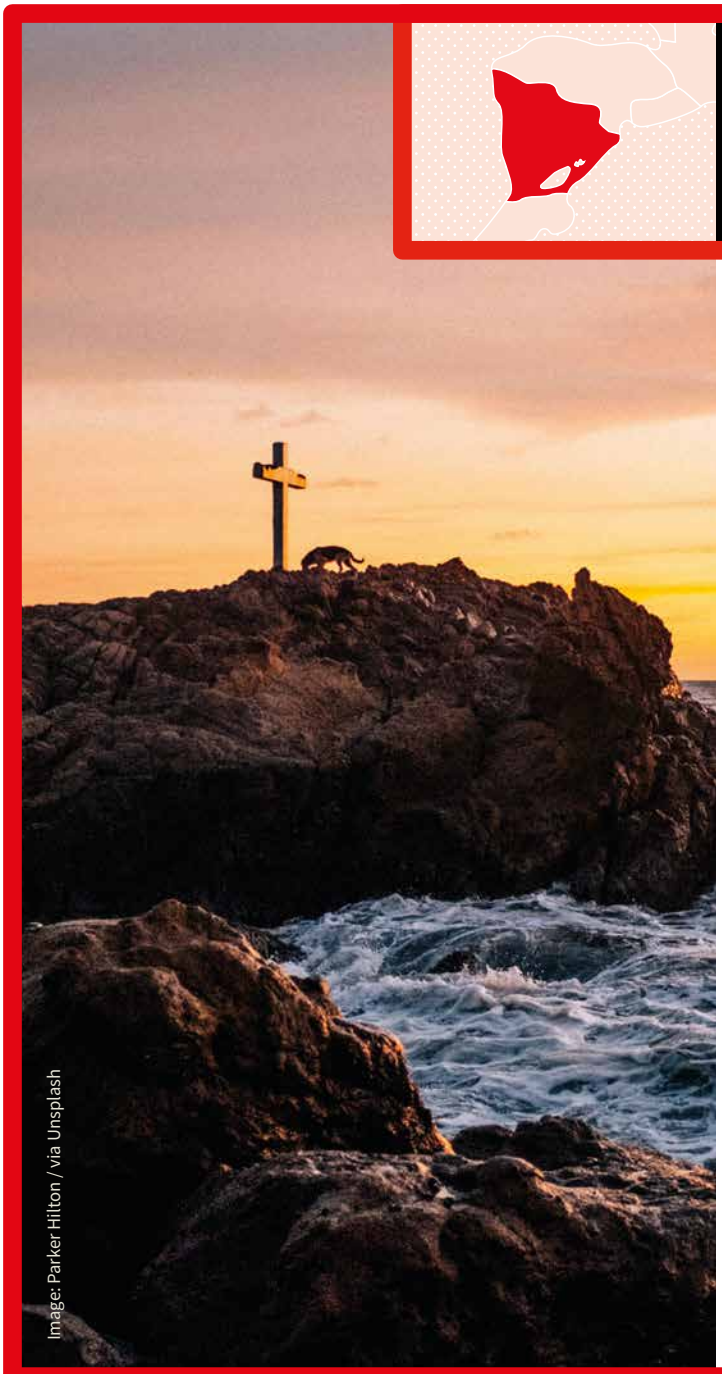


Image: Parker Hilton / via Unsplash

COUNTRY PROFILE

NICARAGUA

Persecution of Christians in Nicaragua is increasing, with the country's record for religious freedom labelled "abysmal" by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).[129] In 2026, it recommended Nicaragua be designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC). According to USCIRF's report, the regime has "sustained its total crackdown on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) by arresting, imprisoning, and exiling religious leaders and adherents, arbitrarily cancelling the legal status of religious organisations, and consolidating its power to harass and intimidate worshipers".[130]

In October 2025, Pope Leo XIV was given a copy of *Nicaragua, a Persecuted Church* which showed more than 1,000 aggressions had been committed against the Church since 2018. Religious persecution started intensifying in April 2018 after clergy supported peaceful protests over various issues, including human rights abuses by the state. Aggressions against the Church have included confiscation and arbitrary closure of property, and public threats.[131] Believers who have raised their voices against the government have experienced surveillance, intimidation, imprisonment and even exile.

The Nicaraguan government has used arbitrary deprivation of nationality to target a wide range of its opponents, including members of Christian denominations. Since February 2023, there have been 452 documented cases of Nicaraguans being declared "traitors to the homeland" in court rulings and lost their nationality.[132] At least 261 members of the Catholic clergy have been expelled from the country, including Bishop Carlos Enrique Herrera, president of the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference, in November 2024 (see case study, right). Nearly 140 priests and more than 90 religious Sisters have been forced into exile, as well as dozens of seminarians, and three deacons.[133]

SELECTED INCIDENTS

AUGUST 2024 Father Denis Martínez García was arrested while on his way to celebrate Mass in Matagalpa and exiled to the Vatican six days later.[134] All arrests that month occurred just three days after the state exiled seven priests to Rome, six of whom belong to Matagalpa Diocese.[135]

JANUARY 2025 Police officers and officials from the Attorney General's office seized St Aloysius Gongaza Seminary in Matagalpa Diocese, briefly detaining at least 30 seminarians before forcibly removing them from the site, on the afternoon of Monday 20th. The property was expropriated by the state.[136]

JULY 2025 In a series of raids Nicaraguan national police took Protestant Pastor Rudy Palacios Vargas and seven other Christians into custody without warning or warrants. It was reported that they were charged with treason and "undermining national integrity".[137]

MARCH 2026 Ortega's regime prevented thousands of public Holy Week processions in Nicaragua. Since 2019 the dictatorship has banned more than 27,000 processions and deployed some 14,000 agents to monitor churches.[138]

MARCH 2026 The government prohibited the ordinations of priests and deacons in four dioceses whose bishops remain in exile.[139]

JUNE 2026 80-year-old Bishop (Emeritus) Abelardo Mata of Estelí was detained at a medical centre and taken into police custody on Monday 29th. The previous day he had invoked prayers for Nicaragua's persecuted Church at Mass. He was released several hours later.[140]

CASE STUDY

TOP CATHOLIC BISHOP EXPELLED



The expulsion of the president of the Nicaraguan bishops' conference from the country occurred without fanfare or ceremony. On 12th November 2024, he was placed on a flight out of Managua. As the plane left Nicaragua's capital, the government believed he had left his homeland forever.

Bishop Carlos Enrique Herrera Gutiérrez of Jinotega was flying to Guatemala, a country he knew well. He had studied theology and philosophy there while training as a Franciscan priest. But when he landed in Guatemala City less than two hours later, he was not just a visitor. He had become an exile, forced to live with a Franciscan community outside the country where he was born.

Bishop Herrera of Jinotega was forced out of Nicaragua after speaking out against the local mayor for continually organising noisy activities outside San Juan Bautista Cathedral while Mass was being held. Sources in the country have stated authorities across the country often stage noisy events outside major churches, including a boxing tournament outside the Cathedral in León.

Blaring music outside the cathedral had interrupted Masses. So at the evening Mass on Sunday 10th November, Bishop Herrera spoke out about the constant, and calculated, disruption of services: "What the mayor and all the local authorities are doing is sacrilegious... We ask God's forgiveness for them and for ourselves."

For simply speaking out his nationality was revoked.

In the days leading up to Bishop Herrera's expulsion, Jinotega Diocese's Facebook page — which was used to live stream Mass and other services — was taken down. At the time he left, priests across the country had been banned from entering hospitals, so they could not anoint the sick in accordance with the scriptural tradition (James 5:14ff).

Bishop Herrera, who had been the president of Nicaraguan bishops' conference since 2021, was the third Catholic bishop to be expelled. A fourth, Rt Rev'd Silvio José Báez, the Auxiliary Bishop of Managua, was not expelled but forced to flee the country in 2019 after receiving death threats.

In March 2026 Nicaraguan authorities prohibited all ordinations in the four dioceses where the bishops are in exile, including Bishop Herrera's diocese Jinotega.

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NICARAGUA



Image: Juan Zamoran / via Pexels

NIGERIA

CASE STUDY

FROM SANCTUARY TO SLAUGHTER: 200 LIVES LOST IN ONE NIGHT



During one deadly night in 2025 more than 200 Christians were massacred and 3,000 people of all ages ran for their lives. The bloodbath happened between 13th and 14th June when militant Fulani herdsmen attacked the town of Yelewata in Benue State, which is 98 percent Christian, killing people and setting buildings alight.

Internally displaced families were in buildings repurposed as temporary accommodation in the market square, in Guma Local Government Area, near Makurdi, when the militants stormed in, shouting "Allahu Akhbar" ("God is great"). The victims were then killed — shot, macheted, and burned alive — as they slept or attempted to flee.

Speaking to ACN from Yelewata, less than 12 hours after the atrocity, the town's parish priest, Father Ukuma Jonathan Angbianbee, described how he and a number of IDPs narrowly escaped death, by dropping to the floor of the church's presbytery at the first sound of gunfire.

He said: "When we heard the shots and saw the militants, we committed our lives to God. This morning, I thank God I am alive. What I saw was truly gruesome. People were slaughtered. Corpses were scattered everywhere."

He added that some bodies were so badly burned it was difficult to identify them. The priest noted that Yelewata had absorbed thousands of IDPs from neighbouring villages — as it was considered relatively safe, lying on the main road to Abuja — but now was largely deserted, with many taking refuge in nearby Daudu and Abagena.

Father Jonathan said that the attack was carefully coordinated, and that the militants accessed the town from multiple angles and used the cover of heavy rains to mount their assault. Catholic clergy criticised the security response to the attack, saying that the police who stopped the militants from accessing the church were poorly equipped and were unable to prevent the attack on the nearby market place.

One priest said: "The morning after the attack there were plenty of police and other security but where were they the previous evening when we needed them?" Another added: "This is by far [the] worst atrocity we have seen. There has been nothing even close." Visiting the scene of the massacre the following week, General Christopher Musa, the Chief of the Defence Staff in Nigeria, reportedly suggested insider collaboration in the attacks, saying: "We have observed that the way some of the burnings were carried out shows they were targeted. It indicates the presence of insiders compromising security efforts."

Church leaders have repeatedly called for international help, claiming that a jihadist plan is underway to seize land and ethnically cleanse the region of its Christian presence.

Sources

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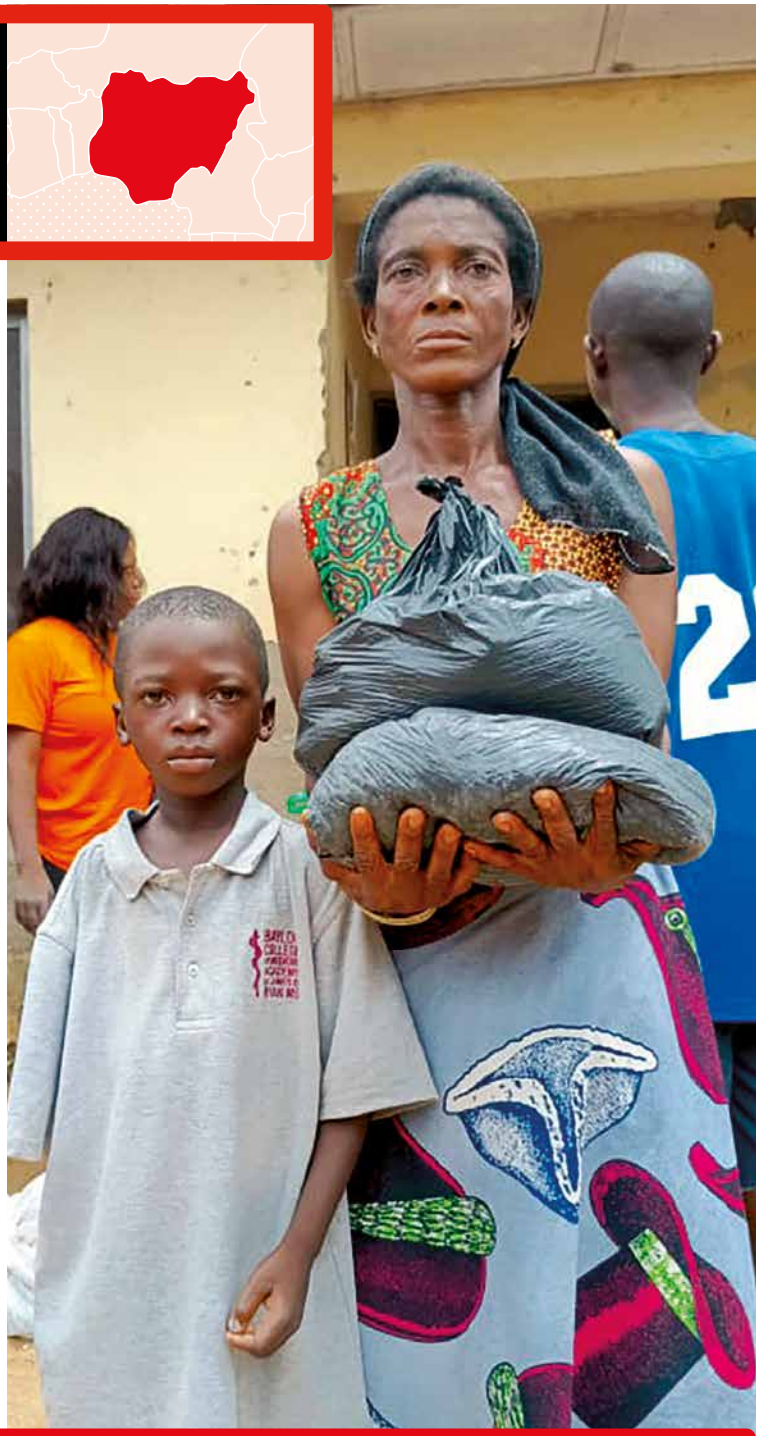
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COUNTRY PROFILE

NIGERIA



"Violence targeting Christians and other religious minorities continues to be rampant," warned UN experts in June 2026.[141] In 2024-26, Christians experienced mass attacks and abductions, particularly in the north-east and Middle Belt. They also reported deep-rooted discrimination, including political and educational exclusion — as well as being targeted for kidnapping.

Attacks on mostly Christian settlements across the Middle Belt have contributed to more than 3.5 million IDPs across Nigeria. The overly simplistic reading of this as a clash between farmers and Fulani herders is increasingly questioned, as witnesses describe militants driving out Christians to seize their land. Bishop Wilfred Anagbe of Makurdi said: "What is occurring… is an organised, systematic and brutal cleansing of Christians." Radicalisation of parts of the Fulani herder community[142] means religion is a driver — as witnessed by militants shouting "Allahu Akhbar" (God is great) when killing Yelewata's Christian IDPs (See Case Study).

In several northern states, blasphemy laws exist in state penal codes, and in Kano, Zamfara, Yobe and Sokoto States, the Hisbah (religious police) — operating in violation of Article 214.1 of the federal constitution — enforce *Shari'a*. For example, by destroying alcohol, prohibiting public eating during Ramadan (even for non-Muslims) and arresting those who do not comply.

Forced conversion and marriage of women and girls is an issue, with Islamists posing the biggest problem. Christians — who at the peak of the jihadist kidnappings in the last decade made up *c.*95 percent of the females held[143] — have been coerced to convert to Islam and compelled to enter sexual relations, often being made to marry their assailants. Despite the apex of Islamist abductions having passed, many are still held: of the 276 Chibok girls seized in 2014, 91 remain unaccounted for.[144]

SELECTED INCIDENTS

MARCH 2025 Father Sylvester Okechukwu was kidnapped and murdered in Kafanchan Diocese. Seized from his residence on the evening of Tuesday 4th, he was found dead early the next day.[145]

MAY 2025 36 Christians were killed, nine injured and two abducted in a series of attacks by Fulani militants in Gwer West, Benue State over 24th—26th. The first attack saw Father Solomon Atongo shot as he returned from a memorial service for two Catholic priests.[146]

NOVEMBER 2025 Pupils as young as six were among 253 children, and 12 members of staff, who were seized from St Mary's Catholic School on Friday 21st. On Monday 22nd December, authorities said all students and staff had been released.[147]

JANUARY 2026 177 worshippers were kidnapped from three churches in northern Kaduna State.[148]

APRIL 2026 Kano State authorities defied a High Court order, failing to release seven children seized from a Christian orphanage. Among 27 children taken in 2019 raids and placed in state care, they faced pressure to convert to Islam. A child had died in January 2026 after being denied medical treatment.[149]

JUNE 2026 Pastor Markus Nyam was among 28 Christians killed in an attack on Kawel village in Bokkos, Plateau State on Monday 22nd. Eyewitness Jesse Peter Dukut said Fulani militants called out the names of Church leaders: "They were being directed to hunt them down in their homes."[150]

COUNTRY PROFILE

NORTH KOREA

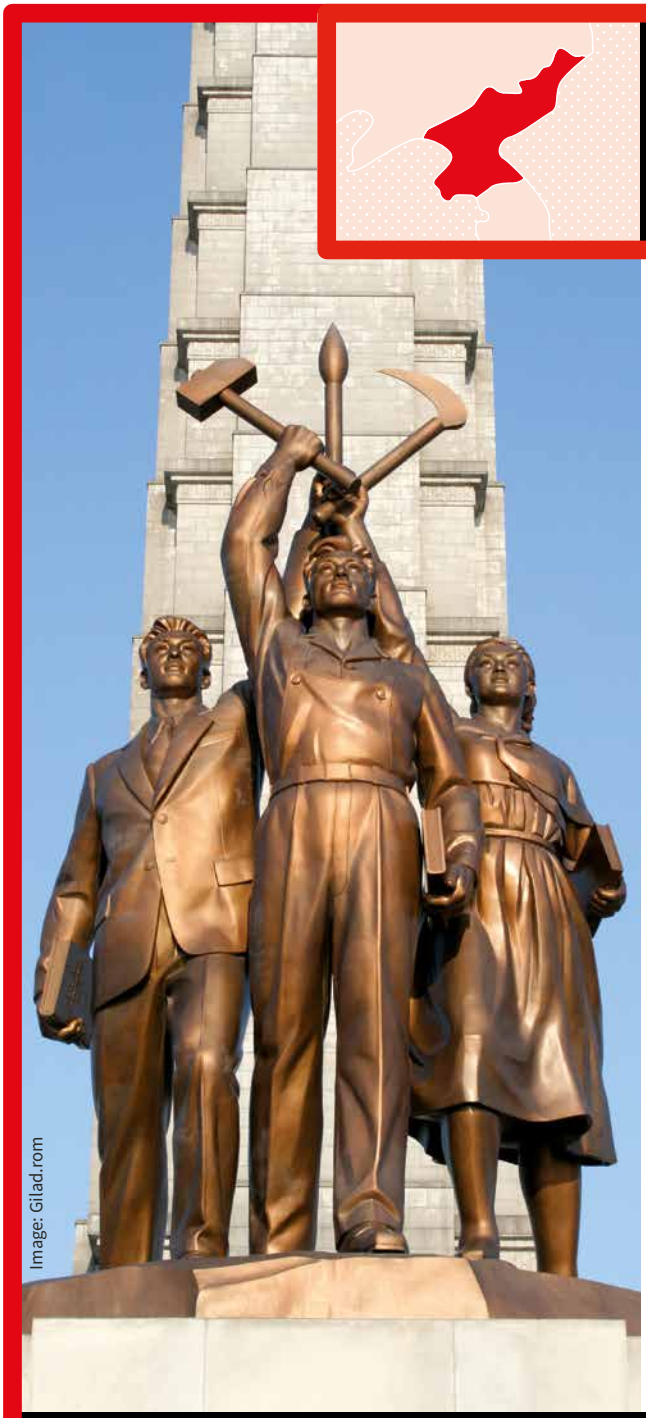


Image: Gilad.rom

North Korea has the world's worst religious freedom record, according to human rights observers.[151] Clandestine reports about a country cut off from the world suggest that the regime has tightened resistance to unwanted religious influence.

Article 68 of the constitution nominally grants freedom of religion.[152] However, repression of religion is integral to the state amid an intensification of a cult of personality centring on former leaders Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il whom the regime portrays as "extraordinary beings".[153]

The regime associates Christianity with the West and opposes it vigorously. The government views Protestant Christians as "collaborators of imperialistic forces and enemies of the nation and revolution".[154]

Christians account for many[155] of the country's political prisoners, who may number 190,000 in total.[156] This is an increase on the period 2022-24, as the regime implemented the 'Reactionary Thought and Culture Rejection Law', aimed at blocking foreign ideological influence.[157] Christians practise their faith in extreme secrecy, with people reportedly hiding their beliefs from their spouses. Since the Youth Education Guarantee Act was introduced in 2021, counterintelligence and surveillance have expanded amid increased crackdowns on religious activity.[158] Owning a Bible, having contact with Christian missionaries and attending religious services can result in torture or forced labour. Desperate to conceal their Bibles, people reportedly wrap the covers with pictures of the Kim dynasty.[159]

Christianity is almost entirely invisible in a country where before the Korean War (1950-53) there were up to 3,000 churches.[160] In late 2025, the regime was reported to have "practically exterminated underground churches" and the authorities were "patting themselves on the back for bringing religion under control".[161]

SELECTED INCIDENTS

JANUARY 2025 A secret Christian in North Korea had his testimony published after he defected to South Korea. "Brother Chun" was born and grew up in North Korea. He said his mother only told him about the Bible "when he was old enough to grasp the weight of that information". He tried to escape to South Korea, where his father was born, but was detained in a neighbouring country. Released on parole, he was transferred to a UN camp and from there entered South Korea.[162]

JUNE 2025 Remembering the Disappeared: A Testimony Report on North Korea's Political Prisoners was published. The report, about 70 Christians who disappeared, includes the case of Kim Sung-Sik, arrested for involvement in a secret Christian community in Hoeryong City. Kim's family has had no contact with him since 2008 when he apparently disappeared from prison.[163]

NOVEMBER 2025 Deacon Jang Moon Seok (also known as Zhang Wen Shi) was reported to be suffering from extreme physical and mental exhaustion following his release after 11 years in prison in North Korea. He had been found guilty of "defaming the regime, attempt[ing] to incite subversion of state power, providing aid and [the] gospel to North Koreans." For many years he was on the North Korean/Chinese border helping refugees. One day, he was lured into North Korea on a false pretext and was then arrested by the authorities.[164]



The statues at Juche Tower in Pyongyang, North Korea.

Image: Lukas Kindl / via Pexels



COUNTRY PROFILE

PAKISTAN

Declining human rights for Christians and other minorities in Pakistan continued a "troubling trajectory"[165] during the period under review. Government policies and legislative changes promised improvement but the reality was very different.

However, Christians and others described the 2023 Religious Education Curriculum as a "progressive initiative"[166] for religious minorities who, instead of having compulsory Islam classes, are now permitted to study their own religions.

The Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) Child Marriage Restraint Act 2025[167] raised the minimum age of marriage for both genders to 18 — up from 16 for girls. The legislation was aimed at "ultimately eliminating" child marriage in a country where the problem is endemic,[168] especially for Christian and other minority faith girls. The Act only applies to the Pakistan capital. Provinces, including Punjab,[169] where most Pakistan Christians live, have also considered such legislation but opponents have slowed progress. Fears were expressed that new legislation would be ignored, as seen in Sindh Province where, despite 2013 laws barring marriage to under-18s,[170] courts have upheld cases involving brides as young as 13.[171] Courts continually invoke *Shari'a* law to override legal age limits for marriage.[172]

In April 2026, UN experts expressed "serious concern" about the abduction, forced conversion and marriage of women and girls from Christian and other minority faith communities.[173] In 2025 it was estimated that there might possibly be up to 2,000 kidnapping cases every year,[174] with those abducted facing physical and sexual abuse.

Concerns grew about increasing blasphemy cases, especially after Section 298A of the Pakistan Penal Code was expanded. Rights watchdog the Center for Social Justice recorded 344 blasphemy cases in 2024, six percent involving Christians, a disproportionately high rate. [175]

SELECTED INCIDENTS

SEPTEMBER 2024 Shagufta Kiran, a 40-year-old Christian mother of four, was sentenced to death for blasphemy after allegedly sharing blasphemous content on WhatsApp.[176]

FEBRUARY 2025 12-year-old Christian girl Saba Shafique from Lahore was abducted while buying milk from the local bazaar by Muhammad Ali, 33, a long-time acquaintance of the family. He is accused of forcibly converting her to Islam and marrying her, with the connivance of local imam Allama Molana Syed Ajjad Hussein. It is alleged he falsified official records to show Saba was 18 years old.[177]

AUGUST 2025 Two years after the attacks in Jaranwala where at least 24 church buildings were desecrated and more than 80 Christians' homes were targeted, Christians held protests against alleged state failure to bring the perpetrators to justice. There were similar demonstrations in June 2025 when a Pakistan court acquitted 10 Muslims allegedly implicated in one of the attacks in Jaranwala. Reports stated that, of the 5,213 accused in connection with the violence against Christians, none had been convicted.[178]

MARCH 2026 More than 100 Christians in Sargodha carried the remains of deceased farm labourer Marqas Masih, 22, and blocked a main road to protest apparent police refusal to investigate the man's death. Mr Masih's family were told by his employer that the young Christian had committed suicide, but when they recovered the body, they reported evidence of torture.[179]

CASE STUDY

TORTURED WITH NAILS – ALL FOR A MOBILE PHONE



“They didn’t just beat him… they nailed him.”

Struggling to hold back tears, Riyasat Masih described how his brother, Kashif, was tortured to death at the farm where he worked near Sialkot, Pakistan.

After discovering him severely injured on the roadside in the small hours of the morning of 12th May 2025, Riyasat recalled how, shortly before taking his dying breath, his brother told him that fellow labourers at the farm where he worked had hammered nails into his limbs and beaten him with iron rods.

Kashif, 35, had been accused of stealing the mobile phone of his employer, former police officer Malik Irfan. An initial police report included evidence that Kashif was tortured to extract a confession. Desperate to find the phone, Riyasat said that at 2.30am his brother’s accusers forced entry into the family home in Jamkay Cheema village but came away without the device.

Riyasat said he then received a tip-off from a neighbour that Kashif had been abandoned on the roadside and so set off in search of him. As day broke, he found his brother “badly bruised with blood gushing out from several parts of his body”.

Photographs said to be of Kashif’s remains show a corpse with burn marks, gashes and bloodied holes on his body. An autopsy report purportedly found that the marks were consistent with wounds from nails and hot metal rods including scorch marks, bruising and cracked ribs.

A human rights lawyer dealing with the case told ACN: “Sadly, it is not uncommon for Christians to suffer persecution in Pakistan but never have I seen such horrible and heart-wrenching violence carried out against someone.”

Requesting anonymity for fear of reprisals, Christian lawyers working on the case said the torture Kashif suffered reflected an attitude of contempt for non-Muslims. One lawyer said: “What Kashif suffered at the hands of these men revealed a mindset in which Christians are held in contempt. They would never treat a Muslim so badly.”

Community accounts say that the attack on Kashif, who worshipped with his family at St Mary’s Catholic Church, Sialkot, had an underlying religious motive. They noted that, at the time, few, if any, other Christians worked for Mr Irfan.

Condemning the attack, minority rights activist Joseph Janssen told Christian news outlet AsiaNews that Kashif’s death was not “an isolated incident” and was part of a pattern of mafia-style violence, religious persecution and state negligence.

Mr Irfan was arrested but the other accused were released on bail. The case is ongoing.

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Children in South Sudan gathering to pray in 2024.

COUNTRY PROFILE

SUDAN

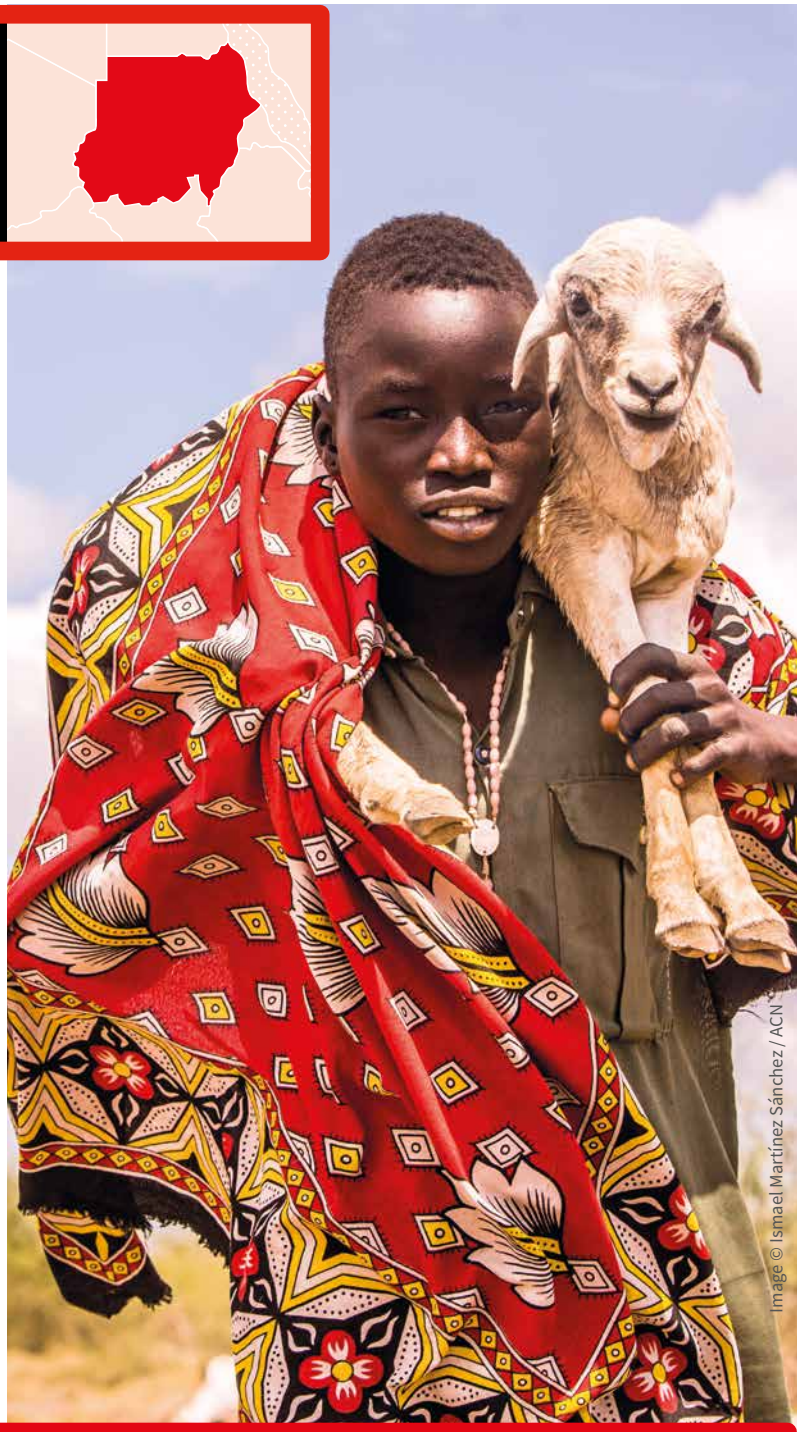


Image © Ismael Martínez Sánchez / ACN

Three years on from civil war breaking out, the country is living through the largest humanitarian crisis in the world,[180] which is bordering on "genocide".[181] Since 2023 the ongoing conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has displaced millions across the country and claimed more than 150,000 lives[182] — possibly as many as 250,000.[183] Evidence suggests Christians have suffered "disproportionately".[184] The growing persecution of Christians seems to be attributable to authoritarianism and Islamist extremism.[185]

In February 2026, the UN said in its Independent International Fact-Finding Mission report that the RSF had committed war crimes and crimes against humanity and that its "conduct, and inferred intent, present indications pointing to genocide". It warned that without decisive measures to advance accountability and protection of civilians, "the risk of further genocidal violence remains acute".[186]

More than 100 churches have been damaged or destroyed since the start of the war[187] and a number of Christians have been told to either renounce their faith or face starvation under a campaign of brutal Islamist repression.[188] Christians living under the SAF are also believed to be facing persecution with multiple churches in the Khartoum area demolished without explanation.[189] Examples of church buildings being targeted are legion: in June 2026 authorities told Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church that their church in southern Khartoum's Mayo Angola area would be demolished. They did give a reason in this instance, alleging the church was built over a road, on land not zoned for religious purposes.[190]

SELECTED INCIDENTS

JUNE 2025 The RSF launched coordinated airstrikes on the Sudanese Episcopal Church, the African Inland Church, and the Roman Catholic Church in El Fasher, killing at least five people, including Father Luka Jumu hit by a stray bullet. Dozens more were injured.[191]

JULY 2025 Christians watched in horror as bulldozers, armed forces, and police arrived at the Pentecostal church in El-Haj Yousif, Khartoum and tore the building down. Those attempting to take footage of the destruction were stopped and church members were unable to save items inside it. Officials later informed church leaders that the demolition was part of an effort to remove "unregulated" buildings throughout Khartoum.[192]

DECEMBER 2025 At least 18 Christians were killed and 18 others seriously wounded after a SAF drone strike in South Kordofan on Christmas Day. Congregation members were making their way to the Episcopal Church of Sudan in Julud when they were hit.[193]

JUNE 2026 Fr Youhanna Al-Amin of St Vincent's Church, Kauda was shot dead in his room. He had remained with parishioners in the Nuba Mountains, despite escalating violence. Kauda is the main centre of areas controlled by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM-N). The priest was killed when soldiers returned; they had stolen medicines intended for the local people the previous day.[194]



COUNTRY PROFILE

SYRIA

Religious freedom for Christians and other religious minorities in Syria has declined since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the rise of Ahmed Al-Sharaa, former leader of the "notorious"[195] Islamist militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).[196]

President Al-Sharaa's transitional government quickly assured Syria's Church leaders that Christians were an integral part of the country's society.[197] A Christian woman[198] was appointed a government minister and when the new President met faith minority leaders he hailed the dawn of "a new era far removed from sectarianism".[199] However, a constitutional declaration giving primacy to Islamic jurisprudence[200] prompted observers to warn of government intent to Islamise the country.[201] Such fears began to be realised amid growing intolerance to non-Islamic practices such as the sale of alcohol, with the regional application of fundamentalist rules and the presence in the streets of bearded Salafist militia.[202]

Attacks climaxing with the deadly June 2025 suicide blast during a Sunday church service in Damascus[203] raised fears of a return to religious-based violence against Christians. Allegedly pro-Assad Alawites emerged as the target of attacks in coastal towns the previous March.[204] Reports suggested a resurgence of Daesh (ISIS) sleeper cells.[205]

Al-Sharaa's regime was criticised for an apparent failure to clamp down on attacks and "control armed Sunni groups that had supposedly joined its security forces".[206] The deteriorating situation raises increasing concerns about the long-term future of the Christian presence. Since 2011, the Christian population has declined by more than 80 percent,[207] with migration driven by factors including poverty and insecurity. Up to 90 percent of the total population live below the poverty line and 7 million are displaced.[208]

SELECTED INCIDENTS

DECEMBER 2024 A Christmas tree in Suqaylabiyah, a Christian-majority town in central Syria, was set alight, prompting protests by Christians across the country alleging infringement of their religious rights.[209]

JUNE 2025 A suicide bomber struck during Sunday 23rd's Divine Liturgy at Mar Elias Greek Orthodox Church in Dweil'a, near Damascus. Witnesses told state media that 25 people died and 63 others were wounded when a gunman entered the church and opened fire on the congregation before detonating an explosive vest. The Syrian Interior Ministry blamed Daesh for the attack.[210]

FEBRUARY 2026 21-year-old Christian Eliah Simon Tekla was shot dead, having been allegedly targeted because of the Rosary hanging in his car. Mr Tekla parked his car outside his home in Murhradah, western Syria, when, as apparently shown in video footage, he got out and was shot at point blank range. Sources linked the attack to Islamic extremism.[211]

MARCH 2026 Churches scaled back Easter celebrations after scores of armed men descended on Al-Suqaylabiyah, a predominantly Christian town in Hama Governorate. Reports, including video footage, showed acts of vandalism, theft, targeting of cars, shops and property. Residents demanded compensation and called for perpetrators to be brought to justice. Churches condemned the incident, saying attacks targeting the Christian community cannot be dismissed as "individual incidents". They warned against the dangers of sectarian tendencies being fuelled by such violence.[212]

COUNTRY PROFILE

TURKEY



Image: M.Emin BiLiR / via Pexels

As part of his November 2025 trip, marking the 1,700th anniversary of the first Council of Nicaea, Pope Leo XIV met local Christian leaders at St Ephrem's Syriac Orthodox Church, Istanbul[213] — the first new church built with government approval since modern Turkey was founded in 1923. Yet positive developments belie deeper problems, as Christians have suffered physical attacks, threats, vandalism and even attempted killings (See December 2024). These are frequently dismissed as isolated incidents and prosecutions are rare.[214]

Current legal interpretations of the 1923 Lausanne Treaty grant minority status to Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Greek Orthodox Christians and Jews. Despite this, they have no legal identity and cannot corporately own properties or seek legal redress. The same applies to other Christian groups which can only own property through separate foundations. Speaking about the difficulties opening new places of worship during the UN's Human Rights Council 58th session, Ramazan Arkan of Antalya Evangelical Churches said: "Turkish churches face many difficulties and much discrimination".[215] Property ownership poses an ongoing problem for Churches and several cases were taken to the European Court of Human Rights.[216]

Christian communities still face restrictions on the training of clergy. Protestant communities cannot train ministers in the country, largely relying on foreign-born staff[217] but since 2020, more than 200 have been expelled.[218] In early 2026, 20 cases were brought before the European Court of Human Rights.[219] On 12th February 2026, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the expulsions, which Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs described as "unfounded allegations".[220] The Greek Orthodox Church's Halki Seminary has been shut for more than half a century[221] and so, like the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, sends candidates for the priesthood abroad for studies. During an April 2025 visit to Halki the Greek Foreign Minister called for its reopening,[222] and US President Trump raised the matter with President Erdogan during his September 2025 visit.[223] Media reports suggest Turkey's Council of Higher Education is now in discussions with the Church about options for future ministerial training on the site — which following refurbishment should reopen in September 2026.[224]

SELECTED INCIDENTS

AUGUST 2024 Aya Lefter Greek Orthodox Cemetery in Kurtuluş, Istanbul, was attacked: several graves were damaged and across the site its grounds were dug up.

DECEMBER 2024 On New Year's Eve, a gunman opened fire on the premises of the Kurtuluş Church Association in Çekmeköy, Istanbul, shouting: "We will not allow you to brainwash our Muslim youth! You infidels will be defeated and driven into hell!"[225]

SEPTEMBER 2025 A man desecrated the cross and other Christian symbols at the fifth-century St Hirmiz's Chaldean Church in Mardin and insulted worshippers. A video of the attack was put on X (Twitter).[226]

JUNE 2026 Residents in the Chaldean Christian village of Aynwardo (Gülgöze), Midyat District complained their land was expropriated by government for renewable energy projects. Christian activists fear this growing trend will drive religious minorities from their historic villages, where populations are rapidly declining.[227]

COUNTRY PROFILE

VIETNAM



Image: Thịnh La / via Pexels

In 2025, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) again called for Vietnam to be designated as a Country of Particular Concern — although the State Department noted improvements in religious freedom since summer 2024, despite stressing more progress was needed. Vietnam remains highly uneven and inconsistent in its implementation of religious freedom.[228] Positive rhetoric and even solid gestures from authorities — such as allowing the Catholic Church's first resident nuncio since 1975 in 2024 — vie with vague, draconian laws like Decree 95 which allow authorities to suspend religious groups for unspecified "serious violations" without giving reasons.

State control intrudes into numerous areas, e.g. no form of religious education is allowed in schools, including Church-run private schools. Authorities have persisted in restricting the movement of religious ministers deemed a threat — including Redemptorist priest Đinh Hữu Thoại[229] — even preventing them from leaving the country. The government can effectively veto the appointment of religious leaders in registered churches.

More than three-quarters of the country's Christians are Catholics, with Protestants concentrated in the Central and Northern Highland areas. Ethnic Christian groups in the highlands, such as the H'Mong and Montagnards, continued to be persecuted. Unregistered groups bear the brunt of state repression, with services disrupted or worse. While no suspicious deaths of Highland Christians were recorded in the period under review, these have occurred in the past. In August 2025, Đắk Lắk police disrupted several Montagnard-organised events for the International Day commemorating Victims of Violence based on Religion or Belief.[230]

SELECTED INCIDENTS

DECEMBER 2024 62-year-old Pastor Y Hung Ayun was shot twice in his left knee at point blank range. Another motorcycle pulled alongside his own as he travelled home to Tara Puôr village in Đắk Lắk Province, and a masked passenger shot him with rubber bullets before speeding away. Pastor Ayun who ministers in the unregistered Montagnard Highland Evangelical Church of Christ believed the shooting was designed to pressure him to return to the government-approved Evangelical Church of Vietnam.[231]

MAY 2025 Montagnard Christian minister Y Thinh Niê was sentenced to nine years' imprisonment for separatist activities. He was seized in late July 2024, without formal charge, after refusing to work under the auspices of the state-sanctioned Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South).[232]

JUNE 2025 Sisters mounted a new public protest over their ongoing demands for the return of their former school on Quang Trung Street, Hanoi. The property was expropriated by the Communist Party in the 1970s.[233]

AUGUST 2025 A Catholic house Mass was stopped by police in Thái Nguyên Province at around 8.30pm on Monday 11th. The house in Bình Khang vilage, Đại Từ Commune had its electricity cut off before authorities entered and demanded the service end.[234]

OCTOBER 2025 Pastor Y Nuen Ayun, a leader of the unregistered Montagnard Evangelical Church of Christ was arrested for "repeatedly providing fabricated information about religious activities in the Central Highlands, [and] slandering the government for arresting and oppressing people who participated in 'Christian Protestantism'."[235]

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Persecuted and Forgotten?

Around the world Christians are at increasing risk of harassment, arbitrary arrest and violence — churches are burnt, Christian women are abducted and raped, and the faithful are killed for their beliefs. *Persecuted and Forgotten?* shines a light on incidents where the faithful are suffering because of state authoritarianism or extremist attack.



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