

Persecuted and Forgotten?

A REPORT ON CHRISTIANS
OPPRESSED FOR THEIR FAITH



Aid to the
Church in Need

ACN UNITED KINGDOM

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OPPRESSED FOR THEIR FAITH
2022–2024

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Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2022-24

Cover image: A woman comforts her child after the August 2023 violence in Jaranwala (© NCJP). See p. 35.

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FOREWORD

By Archbishop Bashar Warda
of Erbil, Iraq

Over a hundred thousand Christians were among the many who fled for their lives 10 years ago when Daesh (ISIS) seized vast swathes of Iraq’s Nineveh Plains. For years since they have lived like refugees in their own country, helped only by their fellow believers around the world – including substantial help from ACN.

The genocide that we suffered continues to cast a long shadow – the migration of Christians continues to the point where the Church is threatened with extinction in towns and cities where our presence dates back almost to the time of Christ.

Meanwhile, as this *Persecuted and Forgotten?* report shows, Christians in other countries are today facing jihadist extremism, whether in Burkina Faso or Mozambique – and equally bitter is the oppression of believers by authoritarian regimes like China or Nicaragua.

But the report also shows that after the onslaught Christians can rebuild their lives – just as we did in Iraq – and yet our communities here continue to face challenges due to the lack of livelihood programmes; it means the Church has to find money to support the key structures we have built in Kurdistan to ensure Christians stay and be the voice of Jesus in all Iraq: new churches, a Catholic university, four schools and a hospital. Such structures need support to grow and to be maintained; we therefore depend on the international community to listen to our appeals for help.

Our prayer is that those reading this report, whether governments or others with influence, will do more than just pay lip service to reports of Christian persecution; they must match their words with action – clear and decisive policy commitment – to help those whose only crime is the Faith they profess. It is vital that they act on early warnings – given in reports such as this – to prevent what happened to us in Iraq taking place elsewhere.

I still remember the terror caused by the rise of the jihadists – but also the people’s hope, and the charity shown by our brothers and sisters around the world. Please continue to keep all those who suffer in your prayers and in your love. We keep you in our prayers.

Most Rev Bashar M Warda CSsR,
Chaldean Archbishop of Erbil

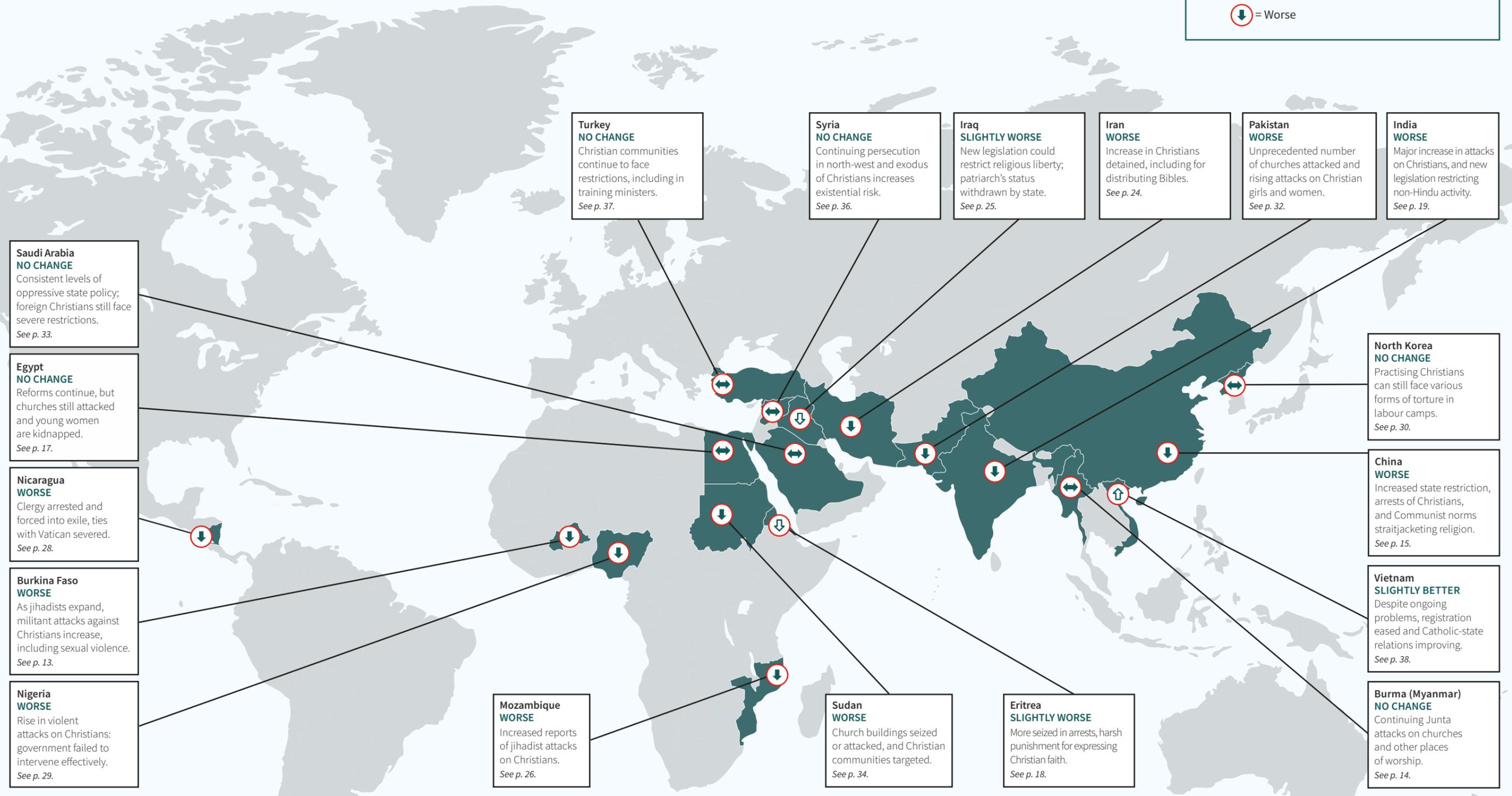
AT-A-GLANCE COUNTRIES OVERVIEW

Persecuted and Forgotten? examines the challenges facing Christians in 18 countries, where they suffer a range of problems, which can include harassment, detention, forced displacement and murder. 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 interest during the period under review, which covers August 2022 to June 2024 inclusive.

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.

PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS COMPARED WITH 2020-2022

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



PERSECUTED AND FORGOTTEN?

Main Findings

“The person who succeeds in killing us knows they would be hailed as a hero.”¹

Speaking to a delegation from Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) during a clandestine meeting in Pakistan, Christian woman Mariam Lal recalled the terrifying events that unfolded while working as a nurse at a hospital in Pakistan. The incident followed Mariam’s appointment as the hospital’s chief nurse; fellow staff were reportedly furious that a Christian had been given the post. A mob descended and accused Mariam, 54, and fellow nurse Newosh Arooj, 21, of committing blasphemy. The incident involved a sticker containing a Qur’anic verse which had been damaged while being removed from a hospital locker. The mob rejected claims that psychiatric patients were responsible for tearing the sticker and blamed the two nurses of desecrating the sacred text. The nurses were at risk of being stabbed to death but, with the help of friends, escaped.

Their voices cracking with emotion as they described their ordeal, Mariam and Newosh told ACN that they had been in hiding ever since, frequently changing location to avoid detection.

The two nurses’ story is just one of countless incidents of persecution against Christians told to ACN staff during fact-finding visits to countries where so often people’s only crime is to follow Christ.

Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2022-24 provides case studies, country, regional and global analysis on the extent to which Christians are targeted around the world. Even before the period under review in this report, evidence was already showing that persecution and oppression were getting worse. Pew Research Center data for 2021 showed that Christians suffered religiously-motivated harassment ranging from verbal abuse through to killings in more countries than ever before – 160 in total, a rise of 50 countries since 2012. Not only were Christians experiencing fundamental human-rights violations in more countries than any other faith group but the gap between them and the next worst-affected religious group had significantly widened.² In his January 2023 speech to the Vatican diplomatic corps Pope Francis said that around the globe one in seven Christians experiences persecution,³ quoting recently published figures.⁴

This edition of *Persecuted and Forgotten?* assesses the situation in 18 countries where religious freedom violations against Christians are of particular concern. The period under review ran from 1st August 2022 to 30th June 2024 and the analysis set out to establish whether the religious freedom landscape affecting Christians had worsened since 2020-22. Research showed that in a majority of countries violence and/or oppression had indeed increased. In many, if not most, cases, this deterioration did not affect the entire country, only specific regions. ***Persecuted and Forgotten? 2022-24*** found that in more than 60 percent of countries surveyed, human rights violations against Christians had increased since the last report which covered 2020-22. The report uncovered factors which explain why persecution and oppression have worsened not only in individual countries but across continents:

The epicentre of militant Islamist violence has shifted from the Middle East to Africa

- The strategic focal point of trans-national Islamist militant aggression against Christians and other major targets has now shifted decisively away from the Middle East to Africa. While jihadi militantism persisted in pockets of the Middle East such as Idlib, Syria, state authorities in the region made significant strides in clamping down on violent Islamist groups. By contrast, in parts of Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Mozambique and elsewhere, Christians were terrorised by extremist violence.
- Militant Islam was a key factor in explaining why there was a prevalence of increased persecution affecting all six countries reviewed in Africa, with evidence suggesting the growing reach of trans-national jihadi groups.⁵
- “Opportunistic caliphates”, identified as an emerging concern in ACN’s *Religious Freedom in the World Report 2023*, became a major concern by summer 2024.

An IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camp in Kaya, Burkina Faso, where almost half of the population are displaced due to jihadist violence. See p. 13 for the country profile.



- Mass migration of Christian communities, triggered by militant Islamist attacks, has destabilised and disenfranchised them, raising questions about the long-term survival of the Church in key regions.

Intensified targeting of Christians as enemies of the state and/or of the local community

- Authoritarian regimes, including those in China, Eritrea, India and Iran, ramped up repressive measures against Christians, either in the name of religious nationalism or state secularism/communism. The restrictions included tougher sentencing for alleged insults against state ideology, confiscation of places of worship, increased arrests of clergy and laity as well as longer periods of detention.
- Against a backdrop of growing concerns about anti-Church oppression in parts of Latin America, for the first time in *Persecuted and Forgotten?*'s 18-year history Nicaragua is included as a country spotlighted in the report because of a range of extreme oppressive measures targeting Christians, notably the mass detention and expulsion of clergy, including all members of the apostolic nunciature.
- Standing out against this general trend is Vietnam, which was the only country in the report categorised as “slightly improved”, with steps taken to re-establish diplomatic ties between the state and the Vatican and reduced red tape regarding the registration of religious groups.

State and non-state actors increasingly weaponised existing and new legislation criminalising acts deemed disrespectful to the state religion as a means of oppressing Christians and other minority religious groups

- In India, by May 2023, 855 people were reportedly detained under anti-conversion laws introduced in Uttar Pradesh in 2020.⁶ In Pakistan, there was an upsurge in large-scale attacks on Christians triggered by accusations of blasphemy, notably in Jaranwala in August 2023 and Sargodha in May 2024. In Iraq, Church leaders expressed fears that laws barring insults against religion would be used as a pretext to restrict Christian worship and practice.

Reports highlighted the threat to Christian children, especially girls

- Evidence suggested an increase in cases of Christian girls as young as 10 suffering abduction, sexual violence, forced marriage and forced conversion. Emerging data pointing to a surge in cases of minority faith girls and young women being abducted was reported in Pakistan and other research showed it was a recurring problem in Egypt.
- However, reports from Saudi Arabia and Egypt showed the authorities had removed religious hate material against Christians and other religious minorities from school textbooks.

- Nevertheless, a culture of discrimination was reported in schools, for example in Turkey, with students banned from marking Christian feasts and complaints about Islamic indoctrination in schools.⁷
- The impact of the above-mentioned mass migration triggered by an upsurge in violence, including persecution against Christians, was particularly severe for children. Sub-Saharan countries, such as Sudan, reported record levels of children suffering extreme food scarcity.⁸

Africa

The situation for Christians in Africa has been on the decline since August 2022, with Islamist militancy emerging as a principal cause of concern. The period saw ongoing jihadist and insurgent violence in Sub-Saharan Africa. Christians are not the only victims of armed conflict in these regions, but they tend to be disproportionately targeted by militants.

Most Islamist terrorist activity has taken place in the Sahel region – especially Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Nigeria – but also in Mozambique. Apart from religious extremism, other factors driving the violence include sectarian and ethnic differences, conflict over land, lack of access to resources, weak national governments, separatist movements and alliances between transnational jihadist networks and criminal gangs.⁹

Terrorist and insurgent groups have targeted state authorities, as well as civilians of different faiths. However, evidence shows that Christians are especially vulnerable to attacks and are likely to be targeted by extremists, particularly in countries or regions where they are a minority such as northern Burkina Faso, Mozambique and northern Nigeria.¹⁰

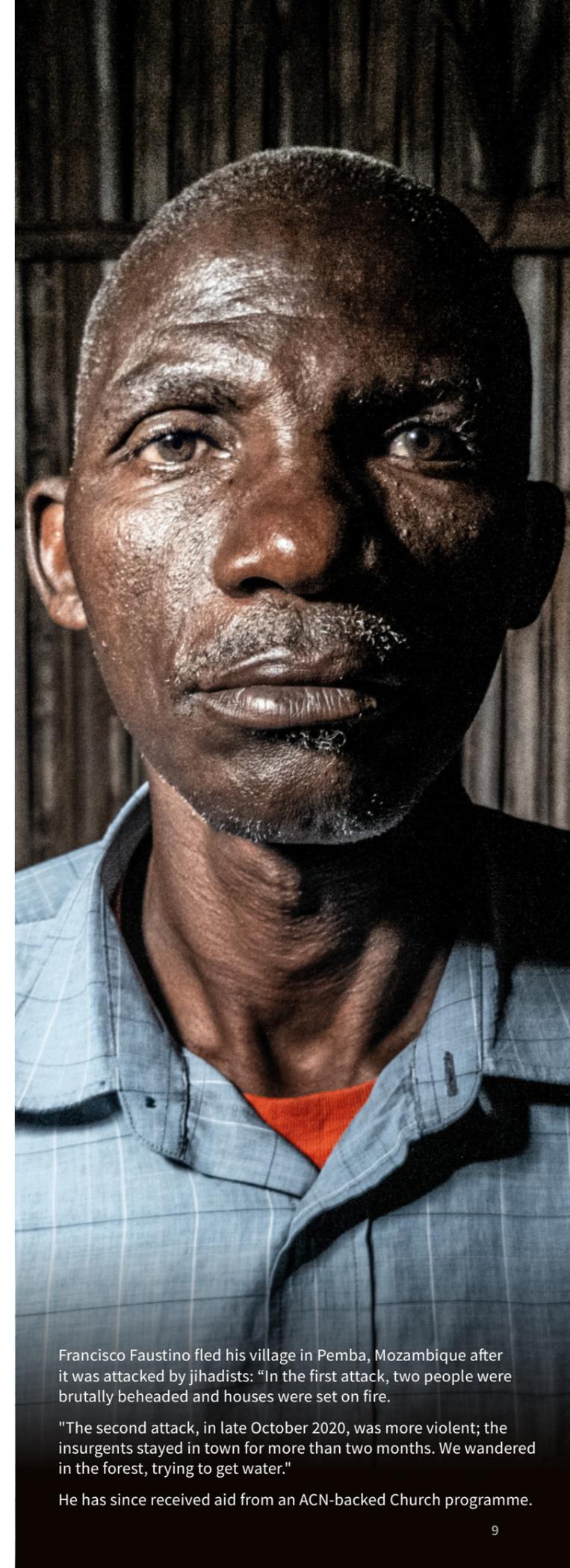
In Burkina Faso and Mozambique, ongoing Islamist insurgencies¹¹ have led to thousands of civilians being killed and millions displaced. Extremists have specifically targeted Christian communities in both countries, separating them from their Muslim neighbours and forcing them out of their villages on a number of occasions.¹² In Burkina Faso, the territories controlled by jihadist groups have expanded and now comprise around 40 percent of the country, with Christian women especially at risk of sexual violence by terrorists.

In Sudan, a coup d'état in October 2021 and an ongoing civil war, which broke out in April 2023, have eroded all previous progress made towards religious freedom. Church buildings have been confiscated for use by the military, and Christian communities have been directly targeted by armed forces.¹³

In Nigeria's northern and Middle Belt regions, Boko Haram/Islamic State: West Africa Province (ISWAP)



Children in Aleppo's predominantly Christian Al-Jdeideh District, which suffered terrible damage during the Syrian Civil War.



Francisco Faustino fled his village in Pemba, Mozambique after it was attacked by jihadists: “In the first attack, two people were brutally beheaded and houses were set on fire.

“The second attack, in late October 2020, was more violent; the insurgents stayed in town for more than two months. We wandered in the forest, trying to get water.”

He has since received aid from an ACN-backed Church programme.

and militant Fulani insurgents remain active. Despite the scale of Boko Haram's activities having declined in comparison with the previous review period, these groups regularly carried out massacres and other violent atrocities, particularly targeting Christians.¹⁴ Abductions of Church personnel are also common.¹⁵ Acts of terrorism are often timed to coincide with Christian holidays.¹⁶

In Eritrea the state is responsible for suppressing Christianity and other faiths. The country's authoritarian regime is the worst governmental violator of religious freedom in the continent, routinely cracking down on church activities and imprisoning members of unauthorised religious groups without trial in inhumane conditions.¹⁷

Middle East

Although much of the Islamist threat has subsided, countries in the Middle East are still reeling from years of war and terror, and Christian populations in some areas face a growing existential threat. In Syria, the Christian community was disproportionately affected by the civil war. Numbering more than 1.5 million before the war began in 2011, Christians have been reduced to as few as 250,000.¹⁸ While the Assad regime, which professes religious tolerance, has regained control of most of the territory formerly controlled by militants, Christians continue to emigrate. In April 2024 Syria's apostolic nuncio Cardinal Mario Zenari stated that 500 Christians were leaving Syria every day.¹⁹

In Iraq, the Christian population declined sharply during the brutal occupation of Daesh, and currently consists of less than 200,000 people out of a population of more than 41 million; roughly 0.46 percent. This dwindling community faces significant societal pressure and discrimination, with conversion from Islam still prohibited by law.²⁰

Christian converts in Iran are among the most targeted groups in the country. They are perceived as colluding with the West, accused of undermining Iran's Islamic regime. Many Christian converts increasingly live underground, and evangelisation remains illegal. Iranian house churches have spread because of church closures, a lack of state licences to build new churches, and access to official churches has been restricted to Armenian and Assyrian Christians. Christian women and girls have suffered increased state oppression, following unrest prompted by the case of Muslim woman Mahsa Amini, who died in custody after being arrested for "violating rules" requiring women to wear headscarves.²¹

While Egypt has seen some improvement for the Christian community, they still experience serious problems: in particular, the abduction, forced conversion and marriage of Coptic Christian women and girls. There is evidence both of systematic kidnapping by gangs and of police officers having conspired to report them as missing rather than abducted. Similarly, women found to have converted to Christianity in Saudi Arabia face confinement and abuse within their families, and can even face honour killings.

Asia

In many countries across Asia, Christians are a minority, making them *de facto* second-class citizens, vulnerable to discrimination and social exclusion. In countries such as India and Pakistan this vulnerability can result in attacks on individuals and churches, such as the February 2024 torching of Grace Community Prayer Hall in Ramanagara, in India's Karnataka State. Regarding Pakistan, UN experts expressed concerns about a rise in abductions, forced marriages and conversion of underage girls and young women from Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism during the period under review. Religio-nationalism has played a significant role in driving problems with Hindutva nationalist groups in India and hard-line Islamist groups like TLP (Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan) seeing minorities as a threat to the demographics of the majority faith. In India, Hindutva rhetoric often stresses that the growth of minorities has eroded the Hindu population. In these settings militant identity politics is the key driver of attacks on Christians and other religious minorities.



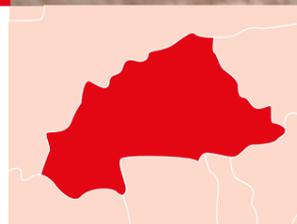
Left: The Blessed Sacrament was burned during an attack on St Joseph's Minor Seminary, Shuwa in Nigeria.

Below: A woman in Bihar State, India prepares food for a meeting in the parish.



COUNTRY PROFILE

BURKINA FASO



State authoritarianism is another key factor driving repression, discrimination and persecution in the region. In countries such as North Korea and China, Christianity can be seen as a harmful foreign influence. The Chinese push towards sinicisation in religion is not so much a move to enculturate Christian worship into the local context, as an attempt to align doctrine with Communist Party principles. Hence religious leaders who refuse to join Patriotic Associations – official state religious groups – can find themselves detained without trial or otherwise sanctioned. Vietnam continues to struggle to move away from its authoritarian past: the rhetoric of religious freedom and attempts to ease registration procedures for religious groups coexist with violent clampdowns on Christian groups in the Highland regions and concerns about scope for possible further restrictions in new government guidelines. However, improved relations between the state and the Catholic Church suggest a desire for positive developments with faith organisations within central government. But more generally in the region, authoritarian governments continue to try to assert their control, regulating religious believers' ability to gather, organise and manifest their faith.

The war in Burma (Myanmar) presents a unique situation in the region, as following the February 2021 coup, the military junta seem to be using violence to subjugate all opposition to centralised norms. Prior to Aung San Suu Kyi's administration, the ruling junta implemented a campaign focused on bringing those who did not belong to the majority ethnicity or faith into obedience, which included torching churches whilst Buddhist pagodas were left untouched. This time, with the junta's February 2021 coup drawing criticism from across the religious spectrum, places of worship belonging to all faith groups have been targeted.

Conclusion

By the end of 2024, nearly 50 percent of the world will have taken part in elections over the course of the year.²² These include world powers, including the US, France and the UK, as well as the European Parliament. For years, governments have been criticised for at best paying lip-service to the need for action on persecution against Christians and other religious minorities. The newly (re-)elected administrations are unlikely to take steps to stop persecution because they have other priorities in terms of international affairs. This is inevitable all the while the world is "dividing fundamentally",²³ with "shocking... developments"²⁴ including the largest war in Europe since 1945, renewed authoritarianism in China and the international fall-out following October 7th attacks in the Holy Land.

However, to ignore the plight of Christians is to ignore "the canary in the coal mine, [that] wherever they are persecuted, the right to religious freedom for all is jeopardised. Wherever they are harassed or jailed, detained or discriminated against, tortured or murdered, governments perpetrate or tolerate abuses against others as well."²⁵

For organisations such as Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), the need for action on persecuted Christians is of course a question of fundamental human rights but it is something more personal too; it is about standing in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Christ. After the ACN delegation in Pakistan bade farewell to Mariam Lal and Newosh Arooj, one of their legal advocates turned round and said: "If you won't hear our voice, who will? We will just be forgotten."

The crucifix in Managua Cathedral, Nicaragua after it was attacked in July 2020.

Central Sahel – including Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – is one of the hotbeds of jihadist activity in Africa,²⁶ having experienced a rapid escalation of extremist violence since the rise of Daesh (ISIS) in 2015.²⁷ A series of coups d'état has caused the security situation to deteriorate even more drastically over the past few years, leading to ever-expanding armed conflict and extreme poverty.²⁸ Jihadists have increasingly used children as soldiers.²⁹ Women and girls in the region suffer some of the highest rates of violence in the world, including child sexual abuse and forced marriage.³⁰

Terrorist groups linked to Al-Qaeda and Daesh control more than 40 percent of Burkina Faso's territory – including vast rural areas, as well as some towns in the north and east of the country.³¹ More than two million people – about 10 percent of the country's population – have been displaced because of the ongoing armed conflict.³²

Extremist activity is concentrated in areas with a strong Fulani presence. Jihadist militias are composed of fighters of Fulani ethnicity, but not all Fulani are terrorists. Apart from religious differences, other factors driving the violence include conflict over land, ethnic tensions and widespread poverty.³³

Attacks by Islamist groups have affected various faith groups, including mainstream Muslims.³⁴ However, according to Bishop Justin Kientega of Ouahigouya, Christians are particularly targeted by jihadists and face harsher control and more severe punishment than their Muslim neighbours. "There is no freedom to worship. In some villages they allow people to pray, but forbid catechism; in other places, they tell the Christians not to gather in the church to pray."³⁵ Terrorists also murdered two Christian school children.³⁶

SELECTED INCIDENTS

MAY 2023 Jihadists began targeting the Christian population in Komienga Province, east Burkina Faso, around Pentecost (28th May) 2023. When a group of Christian women attempted to break through the blockade imposed by the militants, many of them were held captive and repeatedly raped. Some of the women were held as sex slaves for several weeks before being returned to their village pregnant.³⁷

NOVEMBER 2023 Extremists expelled more than 340 Christians from Débé village in north-west Burkina Faso.³⁸ The terrorists murdered two teenagers for flouting their ban on attending school, before giving the rest of the Christian community a 72-hour ultimatum to leave. This is one of the first known examples of Christians in the country being separated from other faith groups and forced out of their homes.³⁹

FEBRUARY 2024 Fifteen worshippers died and two were injured in an attack by suspected Islamist militants during Sunday prayers on 25th inside a Catholic church in Essakane, north-east Burkina Faso. Twelve of the victims were killed instantly, while three others later succumbed to their injuries in hospital.⁴⁰

APRIL 2024 Edouard Zoetyenga Yougbare, a Catholic catechist for 20 years, was abducted and killed by suspected Fulani terrorists on Thursday 18th near Saatenga, south-east Burkina Faso while searching for his donkey. His lifeless body was discovered on the morning of 19th.⁴¹



COUNTRY PROFILE BURMA (MYANMAR)

The last two years have seen spiralling violence, following the February 2021 military junta coup. The Burmese military stands accused of having destroyed more than 200 places of worship belonging to all faith traditions.⁴² The most concentrated destruction of religious buildings was in western Chin state, where the Burmese army razed 85 churches.⁴³ Historic religious buildings were also destroyed, including the 129-year-old Assumption Church in Chan Thar village, Sagaing Region in January 2023.⁴⁴

Christianity is the predominant religion of the Chin, Kachin and Naga peoples as well as being widespread among the Karen and Karenni. Following the 1947 assassination of General Aung San, the tribal regions lost the autonomy

promised by the Panglong Agreement. Subsequently these Christian-majority groups have faced discrimination, violence, restrictions on religious practices and, even before the 2021 uprising, had churches destroyed. The current crisis has led to significant upheaval in these communities, e.g. 282,615 Karenni were displaced of which 95 percent were Christians.⁴⁵

By the end of 2023, the junta had detained 20 Christian ministers as part of a broader crackdown on religious leaders criticising the regime: military tribunals had already sentenced seven of them, and nine others were awaiting trial. Four Chin Presbyterian leaders were reportedly tortured.⁴⁶

SELECTED INCIDENTS

JANUARY 2023 Five people, including a Baptist pastor, Catholic deacon and a two-year-old child, were killed and several others were injured by junta airstrikes on churches in two predominantly ethnic Karen villages in Mutraw, Karen State on Thursday 12th.⁴⁷

AUGUST 2023 Baptist churches in Chin State were hit by the junta: on Saturday 12th, a church was destroyed and seven people were injured during a junta artillery attack on Ramthlo village; on Monday 14th two artillery shells were fired into the courtyard of the church in Hakha city, destroying the pastor's house. A bishop of Hakha Baptist Church said: "It would be a different story if some armed groups were present but this is just an innocent church. It is purely a religious compound. They should have never done damage to such holy places."⁴⁸

NOVEMBER 2023 Bishop Celso Ba Shwe and 80 refugees sheltering in Christ the King Catholic Cathedral, Loikaw fled after Burmese military attacked the complex on Sunday 26th before occupying its pastoral centre the following day. Bishop Shwe said this was the third attempt by the junta to seize the Cathedral compound.⁴⁹

JANUARY 2024 Junta air strikes killed 17 people – including nine children – most of whom were gathering for worship at St Peter's Baptist Church, Kanan village, Sagaing Region on Sunday 7th. Amnesty International called on the UN to designate the attack as a war crime.⁵⁰

APRIL 2024 Father Paul Khwi Shane Aung was hospitalised after being gunned down while celebrating the 6.30am Mass at St Patrick's Church, Mohnyin, Kachin State on Friday 12th. Two men wearing black clothes and masks entered the church on a motorcycle and shot the 40-year-old parish priest. Their motive is still unknown.⁵¹

COUNTRY PROFILE CHINA



Chinese authorities have been strengthening their control over all religious communities, increasingly cracking down on unregistered places of worship, faith leaders and religious activities. Members of clergy must pledge allegiance to the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and "resist illegal religious activities". Estimates of those imprisoned for their religious beliefs range from the low thousands to over 10,000.⁵²

The CCP actively promotes atheism and discourages under-age citizens from practising any religion. The 281 million members of the CCP and its youth organisations are banned from being involved in religious activities.⁵³

Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Buddhism and Taoism are the only recognised religions and followers of these faiths are supposed to practise under the auspices of one of the state-sanctioned 'patriotic associations'. Only groups (e.g. local parishes) belonging to these five religions are permitted to register to be able to hold public worship services.⁵⁴

While owning a Bible is not illegal, the authorities restrict its printing and distribution. Unauthorised editions are forbidden.⁵⁵

All religious groups are mandated to support the CCP's push towards "sinicisation" – making Chinese in character – of all religious activity, and religious groups are expected to deliver patriotic education to believers.⁵⁶ Church leaders and believers refusing to align with the government's agenda are often harassed and may be arrested.⁵⁷

The CCP has also been tightening its grip on Hong Kong,⁵⁸ imposing national security laws which have raised concerns about the future of religious freedom in the region.⁵⁹

SELECTED INCIDENTS

SEPTEMBER 2023 Revisions to the 2005 "Measures for the Administration of Religious Activity Venues" came into effect, requiring "places of religious activity" to uphold the leadership of the CCP and promote the sinicisation of religion. The measures also specify that sermons must reflect "socialist core values" and be integrated with "traditional Chinese culture".⁶⁰

JANUARY 2024 Chinese security forces took Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin of Wenzhou into custody several times between mid-December 2023 and early January 2024. The bishop had refused to join the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and objected to CCP-mandated changes in his diocese, such as the transfer of priests and the division of parishes.⁶¹ He has since been released, according to ACN's sources.

MARCH 2024 Religious freedom experts expressed concerns that Hong Kong's new national security law – which implements Article 23 of Hong Kong's Basic Law – would have severe implications for the confidentiality of the Sacrament of Reconciliation⁶² after the Hong Kong Executive Council's Rony Tong indicated priests could face charges for failing to report national security crimes mentioned during confession.⁶³ Under the legislation, a person could be punished with up to 14 years in prison for failing to inform authorities that someone has committed treason.⁶⁴ The Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong subsequently issued a statement saying that the legislation "will not alter the confidential nature of Confession".⁶⁵

APRIL 2024 A court in Inner Mongolia Province sentenced Christian man Ban Yanhong to five years in prison for selling Bibles on behalf of a Protestant house Church not registered with the authorities.⁶⁶

CASE STUDY

ERIN SHEHATA ANOTHER EGYPTIAN GIRL KIDNAPPED

Young Christian woman Erin (or Irene) Shehata was kidnapped at the beginning of 2024. Her family later received a distressing call from her saying she was being held against her will.

The case of the 21-year-old student's disappearance began while she was in the middle of her examinations for the medical course she was studying at Assyut National University. Erin's brother said: "Early morning on January 22nd, Erin left the house to take Amon [her younger brother] to school in a neighbouring village... After that, she headed to college to take an exam."

That was the last time Erin's family ever saw her. The following day they reported her as missing to the police. The family subsequently found that on the day she was abducted the religion field on her ID card was changed from Christian to Muslim.

The following month, on 15th February, her brother received a disturbing phone call from an unknown number. He said: "It was Erin. She was screaming and crying. She told us that she had been taken. She even told us the name of her kidnapper. She told us the general area she was in. She begged us to come find her before the call ended abruptly." It appears Erin managed to get hold of her captor's mobile, but was discovered during the call.

The family contacted police in Sohag, where Erin said she was being held. They investigated and charged a man. However, they then advised the family to drop the matter, saying Erin had eloped with a Muslim man of her own free will. The family disputes this claim, asking why she would have left in the middle of her exams, taking nothing with her. Her father said: "State Security knows exactly where my daughter is" but added that they refuse to let the family contact the young woman.

As her family looked into her disappearance, they learned that Erin had befriended a young woman on her course whose father is reputed to be an Islamist extremist. Her brother said: "We suspect that this friendship led to her disappearance."

The family has stated that they have evidence that Erin was kidnapped by a Muslim Brotherhood

network – and that State Security has been complicit. This echoes the 2017 testimony of a former member of a kidnapping network who said operatives "weave a spider's web" around their potential victims to facilitate their kidnappings. They then pass them to Islamists who force them to convert. The former kidnapper also revealed that those involved are paid handsomely by these networks, with police officers conspiring so that these young women are reported as missing rather than abducted.

Erin's family has not seen her since she was seized.

Sources: Tim Dustin, "Persecuted Egyptian Christian kidnapped", 7th March 2024 <https://globalchristianrelief.org/christian-persecution/stories/persecuted-egyptian-christian-kidnapped/> [accessed 12/03/24].

Raymond Ibrahim, "Islamists and State Collude in Abducting and Islamizing Coptic Christian Girls in Egypt", 6th March 2024 <https://www.raymondibrahim.com/2024/03/06/islamists-and-state-collude-in-abducting-and-islamizing-coptic-christian-girls-in-egypt/> [accessed 12/03/24].

"Coptic Christian kidnapped; police aiding captors, family says", Morning Star News, 28th March 2024 <https://thealabamabaptist.org/coptic-christian-kidnapped-police-aiding-captors-family-says/> [accessed 05/06/24].

"Egypt: ex-kidnapper admits 'they get paid for every Coptic Christian girl they bring in'", *World Watch Monitor*, 14th September 2017 <<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/09/egypt-ex-kidnapper-admits-get-paid-every-copt-christian-girl-bring/>> [accessed 05/06/24].



Image: via Raymond Ibrahim

COUNTRY PROFILE EGYPT



The Christian community still experiences serious problems, despite things continuing to improve in a number of areas. Positive steps in religious freedom included ongoing revisions to state school textbooks to remove degrading rhetoric against religious minorities and President El-Sisi dialoguing with religious minorities over the drafting of the new personal status law.⁶⁷

New Christian places of worship can be controversial. The easing of legal approval for church buildings continues to be positive, a step forward from the pre-2016 situation when official permission for new churches could take up

to 30 years and required the President's personal approval. However, this has not prevented mob violence against Christian communities where new churches are planned – even if they have received permission.

The abduction, forced conversion and marriage of Coptic Christian women and girls continues. It is almost certainly under-reported, as victims are frequently reluctant to speak about their experiences, which often involve rape. There is evidence both of systematic kidnapping by gangs and of police officers having conspired to report them as missing rather than abducted.⁶⁸

SELECTED INCIDENTS

MAY 2023 23-year-old Christian woman Marina from Qena was apparently kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam after meeting Muslim woman Bahar, who was helping her find a new job. Worried about Marina, her husband Halim repeatedly called her but her mobile was switched off. He said: "That very evening, I filed a police report on my wife's disappearance, but the report wasn't filed until three days later. The police have done nothing to help me. I haven't seen or heard from Marina since." The same day Marina disappeared, a new ID was requested showing her religion as Islam.⁶⁹

SEPTEMBER 2023 The home of Christian man Emad Wagih Emad was torched in Al-Khayari, Abu-Qurqas, Minya Province on Tuesday 5th following an application to build a church. Social media posts whipped up anger saying the church would be built without a licence.

Rioters apparently confused his application to build a new house with the church's application. Attackers cut off the village's electricity supplies.⁷⁰

OCTOBER 2023 25-year-old Christian woman Enjy Malak Baseet from Marsa Matruh went missing on Wednesday 11th while on her way to work. After a phone call saying the family would never see her again, her father filed a report on the kidnapping, but police classified her as a missing person, closing the case a few days later.⁷¹

APRIL 2024 Christians were attacked in Al-Fawakher village, Minya Province on Tuesday 23rd. A local source said extremists initially tried to expel Christians, but started torching homes when they failed. The violence was apparently triggered by plans to build a new Coptic Orthodox church. Three days later, an Evangelical church being built in the same province's Al-Kom Al-Ahmar village was attacked. In both cases authorities responded quickly.⁷²

COUNTRY PROFILE

ERITREA



Eritrea's authoritarian regime is the worst governmental violator of freedom of expression and religion in Africa,⁷³ emphasising “martyrdom for the nation” over spiritual values.⁷⁴

Religious communities are required to register with the authorities in order to be permitted to practise their faith. However, the government only recognises four religions: Eritrean Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and Islam.⁷⁵ The registration process for non-recognised faiths is very complex and leaves unregistered groups vulnerable to harassment.⁷⁶

Members of unauthorised religious groups are routinely imprisoned and told that they will not be released until they renounce their beliefs. Those following officially recognised religions also often face restrictions and backlash – such as forced military conscription⁷⁷ – for publicly practising their faith.⁷⁸ Catholic priests, bishops, Orthodox monks and other Christian leaders have also been detained.⁷⁹

The scale of arrests rose during the period under review: 218 Christians were seized between mid-2023 and mid-2024.⁸⁰ In January 2023, 44 Christians were detained (see right),⁸¹ and three months later 103 students were arrested in one police raid on a school in the capital Asmara (see April 2023). The same month, 44 monks from the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, supporters of the late Patriarch Abune Antonios who was deposed by the government, were arbitrarily detained;⁸² they were later released. Around 400 Christians are imprisoned – without trial – because of religious activities.⁸³

Christians and others arrested for engaging in religious activities are held captive in inhumane conditions at high-security prisons such as Mai Serwa near Asmara, which is notorious for its human rights violations.⁸⁴ Detainees are forced to live in squalor and face violence and intimidation throughout the country's prisons.⁸⁵ Inmates are often held for long periods without an official charge.⁸⁶

SELECTED INCIDENTS

SEPTEMBER 2022 The Eritrean government seized control of the Catholic-owned Don Bosco Technical School in Dekemhare and confiscated all its property without compensation, having done the same with Hagaz Agro-Technical School – a Catholic institution run by the De La Salle Brothers – in August.⁸⁷

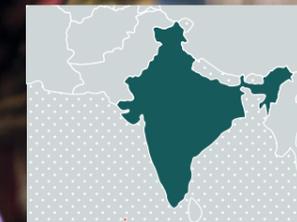
SEPTEMBER 2022 On Sunday 4th, soldiers surrounded Medhanie Alem Eritrean Catholic Church in the Eparchy of Segheneyti during worship. They proceeded to round up boys and girls aged 16, taking them by force to be conscripted for compulsory military service for an indefinite period.⁸⁸

JANUARY 2023 Authorities imprisoned 44 Christians – 39 women and five men – at Mai Serwa for holding religious services in their homes.⁸⁹

MARCH 2023 Eritrean police arrested 30 Christians who had gathered to worship in a private home in the town of Keren.⁹⁰

APRIL 2023 Police detained 103 young Christians, most of them students, who had gathered to worship and record video clips featuring Christian music for social media in Asmara. The members of the group belonged to unregistered denominations. They were imprisoned at Mai Serwa.⁹¹

JANUARY 2024 Thirty Christian adults and an unknown number of children were arrested while celebrating an infant's first birthday in Asmara.⁹²



COUNTRY PROFILE

INDIA

2023 ended with 720 attacks or other incidents of persecution against Christians reported in 23 states⁹³ – with at least 287 incidents occurring in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh alone. According to the United Christian Forum, the total number of violent incidents has been increasing gradually since 2014. 2023's 720 was up from 599 in 2022.⁹⁴

Of 161 incidents in the first 75 days of 2024 (to 15th March), 47 occurred in Chhattisgarh, where Christians were denied access to water from a village bore-well; refused Christian burial; physically assaulted; chased out of their homes or had them vandalised.⁹⁵

Anti-conversion laws, which 12 states have on their statutes, were used as a pretext to pressure Christian institutions: schools and orphanages have been searched, and priests and Sisters accused of converting children.⁹⁶ Between the anti-conversion law being enacted in Uttar Pradesh in 2020 and May 2023, over 855 people were detained under them.⁹⁷

While the conflict in Manipur is to a certain extent an ethnic and territorial clash between Meitei and Kuki groups, extremist groups have exploited tensions to drive religious attacks, destroying 500 churches.⁹⁸ Meitei Christians were pressured to convert to the tribe's traditional Sanamahi religion and burn Bibles. These attacks were reportedly driven by groups militantly reasserting Sanamahism: BJP politicians stood accused of encouraging them for political ends.⁹⁹

SELECTED INCIDENTS

MAY 2023 Archbishop Dominic Lumon of Imphal told ACN, “about 249 churches belonging to Meitei Christians” were destroyed within 36 hours of tribal violence starting. The attacks were carried out by other Meiteis. Archbishop Lumon said: “We can see that they were also acting out of hatred of Christianity, because the Meitei churches were also destroyed and because the non-Kuki religious leaders also had to flee from Imphal”.

SEPTEMBER 2023 Nine people were charged, including Christian minister Ajay Lall, after the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) claimed irregularities in a Christian orphanage. NCPCR Chairman Priyank Kanoongo posted on X (Twitter) alleging “human trafficking, religious conversions of children, tribal children made pastors, orphan children adopted only by Christian families”.¹⁰⁰

NOVEMBER 2023 Christians were prevented from burying their dead on at least five occasions in Chhattisgarh State's Narayanpur District, according to local Christian civil society leader and politician Phulsingh Kachlam. He said: “The latest incident was [on the 20th], wherein police officials and the Tehsildar [revenue department official] engaged in violence and forcibly took away the body of Sukhram, a local tribal Christian from the village Koliyari, after local Hindus and other villagers objected to his burial.”¹⁰¹

FEBRUARY 2024 20 Christians, including children, were wounded when a 200-strong mob attacked Janwada village's Methodist Church in Rangareddy District, Telangana State on the evening of Tuesday 13th. The attackers, reportedly members of nationalist organisation Bajrang Dal, attacked the church while the Dalit Christians were praying there.¹⁰²

JUNE 2024 32-year-old Bindu Sodi was killed by her uncle, who was part of an extremist mob that attacked her family in Toylanka village, Dantewada District, Chhattisgarh State on Monday 24th. Ms Sodi's uncle previously pressured them to renounce Christianity.¹⁰³

CASE STUDY

MORE THAN 300 NIGERIAN CHRISTIANS MASSACRED ON CHRISTMAS EVE

Hundreds of suspected Fulani militants murdered more than 300 people and injured hundreds more in coordinated attacks on more than 30 villages near Bokkos town in Nigeria's Plateau State on Christmas Eve 2023. The extremists also burnt down entire villages and destroyed food supplies, aggravating the region's ongoing food crisis.

The attackers stormed at least 20 of the affected villages simultaneously, shooting at all residents indiscriminately with machine guns. Some of the terrorists also attacked locals with machetes while setting their houses on fire. The communities targeted were majority Christian. Many of the victims were women and children.

Photographer Jalang Mandong survived the massacre but lost 10 of his relatives, including his father and a brother. He and some other villagers initially attempted to defend their families but were overwhelmed by the sheer number of militants without having any advanced weapons to fight back with. His father and brother were initially shot before being attacked with machetes until they died in front of his eyes.

Mr Mandong said that the attacks were designed to "disrupt the celebration of Christmas", while also attempting to "take over the lands of these communities". He and thousands of other locals fled their villages after losing their homes and all their property.

Many of those displaced have sought refuge inside Church buildings. There are now more than a dozen IDP camps in Bokkos, mostly located within Church premises.

"In situations like this, people often rush to churches, rather than to police stations, because they don't have confidence in government institutions," said Father Andrew Dewan, director of communications in Pankshin Diocese where most of the attacks took place.

Locals were not feeling safe following the massacre according to Father Dewan, with "the same old members of the security forces patrolling occasionally who did not fire a bullet during the attacks".



Top Right: Clerics caring for IDPs at a camp in Pankshin Diocese following the Christmas 2023 massacre in Bokkos, Plateau State.

Bottom Right: Jalang Mandong who lost relatives in the attacks.



As of June 2024, no one has been charged with carrying out the attacks. Father Dewan said: "We have heard of some arrests but no prosecution, much to the frustration of survivors and victims' families.

"We are used to this charade," he added. "Attackers are often arrested and later set free. Politicians give speeches that contain no grain of truth. They make promises and pledges of rehabilitating and reinstating all those displaced back to their ancestral homes, but that is often not the case."

Some Christian farmers attempted to return to their fields following the attacks and saw Fulani herdsmen

destroying their harvest and other food products. Eyewitnesses have also confirmed that the extremists burnt down a number of farms and food barns, exacerbating an already severe food shortage in the area.

Father Dewan stressed that the terrorists targeted Christian communities specifically and chose to strike on Christmas Eve when most people were at home. Therefore, he said that he finds the narrative presenting the massacre – and other similar atrocities committed by Fulani militias against Christian villagers – as merely a conflict over land between herders and farmers "ludicrous".

Sources: Amy Balog, "No justice for 300 people massacred on Christmas Eve", *ACN (UK) News*, 18th January 2024 <https://acnuk.org/news/nigeria-no-justice-for-300-people-massacred-on-christmas-eve> [accessed 12/06/24].

Amy Balog, "Survivors of Nigerian Christmas Eve massacre still sheltering at Catholic church", *The Catholic Herald*, 24th January 2024 <https://catholicherald.co.uk/survivors-of-nigerian-christmas-eve-massacre-still-sheltering-at-catholic-church-awaiting-justice-that-likely-wont-come> [accessed 12/06/24].

Women are second-class citizens in Pakistan, and Christian women are third-class citizens, vulnerable to abduction and rape. ACN has been helping to give a much-needed voice to the hundreds of Pakistani Christian women and girls who are forced to marry their captors and convert to Islam each year. Working with the Pakistani Church's National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP), ACN has supported an advocacy, media engagement and public awareness campaign – including conferences and consultations with lawmakers and community leaders.



Image: © Ismael Martínez Sánchez / Aid to the Church in Need

COUNTRY PROFILE

IRAN



A “sharp” deterioration in the rights of Christians and other minorities was observed in 2022¹⁰⁴ and conditions “remained extremely poor” the following year.¹⁰⁵ Cases of Christians detained in Iran rose from 59 in 2021 to 134 the following year and then to 166 in 2023.¹⁰⁶ Authorities increasingly targeted people for distributing Bibles, with more than “one-third” of arrests involving people caught with multiple copies of the sacred text.¹⁰⁷ Many suffered physical or mental abuse, including psychological torture.¹⁰⁸

This crackdown came after unprecedented protests erupted in autumn 2022 following the death in suspicious circumstances of Iranian woman Mahsa Amini. The 22-year-old Muslim was under arrest for allegedly “violating rules” requiring women to wear headscarves.¹⁰⁹ The government had begun to implement 2021 amendments to Articles 499 and 500 of the penal code introducing prison sentences for those guilty of “insulting Islam” and undertaking “deviant activity” seen as flouting Islamic law.¹¹⁰

The state officially recognises Christian communities, including Roman Catholics, and some Orthodox and Protestant denominations but they are banned from reading the Bible in the national language Farsi. Contact with Christian converts from Islam may result in imprisonment.¹¹¹

Christian converts from Islam are among the most targeted groups in the country. They are perceived as colluding with the West, accused of undermining Iran’s Islamic regime. Converts may number between 800,000¹¹² and 1.2 million.¹¹³ Increasingly they live underground.¹¹⁴ Evangelisation remains illegal. Iranian house churches have spread “because of church closures and a lack of state licences to build new churches or because access to official churches has been restricted to Armenian and Assyrian Christians.”¹¹⁵

SELECTED INCIDENTS

AUGUST 2022 The Court of Appeals in Tehran Province confirmed the convictions of three Christian converts, Jozef Shahbazian, Somayeh Sadegh and Mina Khajavi. They had been fined and sentenced to a combined 16 years in jail.¹¹⁶

DECEMBER 2023 Christian convert Esmaeil Narimanpour was arrested on Christmas Eve at his home in Dezful, western Iran. His Christian books were confiscated. Mr Narimanpour, who had previously been forced to attend ‘re-education’ sessions with an Islamic cleric, was able to call his family briefly on Christmas Day to say he was being held in Ahvaz, about 95 miles (150km) south of Dezful. When his wife and brother followed up the case, they were questioned and detained for several hours.¹¹⁷

MARCH 2024 Iranian woman Laleh Saati, 45, who converted from Islam to Christianity while in Malaysia, returned home only to be jailed for two years for acting “against national security”. Ms Laleh, who went back to Iran in 2017 to be reunited with her elderly parents, was repeatedly questioned by intelligence agents over several years before being arrested in February 2024 at her father’s home in a Teheran suburb. After three weeks of interrogations, she appeared before the Revolutionary Court in Teheran.¹¹⁸

APRIL 2024 Christian prisoner of conscience Mina Khajavi was reportedly prevented from accessing medical care while inside Tehran’s Evin Prison. The Christian convert, who has arthritis, is serving a six-year sentence for leading a house church.¹¹⁹

COUNTRY PROFILE

IRAQ



SELECTED INCIDENTS

MARCH 2023 Protests broke out in the Iraqi town of Qaraqosh in the Nineveh Plains, with the local Christian population rebuffing an attempted takeover by the militia Kataib Babilayoun of a base belonging to the Emergency Response Unit of the Nineveh Plains Protection Unit: an approximately 500-strong Christian regiment made up of local men. The protests were conducted with the backing of Archbishop Younan Hanno and other top Christian leaders in the Nineveh Plains.¹²⁵

MARCH 2023 Christian politicians filed a lawsuit asserting that a 2023-reactivated ban on the sale, import, or production of alcohol was harmful to non-Muslims. Lawmakers behind the 2016 bill on which the recent ban was based cited the Iraqi constitution’s prohibition of legislation that contradicts Islam. Christian, Yazidi, and other non-Muslim community members have characterised such legislative campaigns as infringements of both their religious expression and their livelihoods, contributing to long-term insecurity, prompting emigration, and ultimately damaging their communities’ prospects for continued existence.¹²⁶

JULY 2023 President Abdul Latif Rashid revoked a decree recognising Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako as the leader of the Chaldean Catholic Church, prompting the cardinal to leave the patriarchal see in Baghdad. Iraq’s Christian community publicly protested against the revocation, and Cardinal Sako condemned it as part of a deliberate campaign against him and the Church.¹²⁷ The cardinal returned to Baghdad in April 2024 on the personal invitation of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia’ Al-Sudani, and in June 2024 Al-Sudani issued a decree restoring Cardinal Sako’s “institutional recognition”.¹²⁸

APRIL 2024 Reports circulate of Christians facing threats and harassment during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. These include one Christian being called an apostate by police and threatened with detention, and one Christian student being called a “Nazarene” during a lecture; a term Daesh would mark houses with to indicate Christians were living there and should be targeted.¹²⁹

JUNE 2024 In late June, the Turkish army bombed Miska, a Christian village,¹³⁰ during its bombardment of the Metina region of Southern Kurdistan (northern Iraq). The Christian church in the village was also hit in the attack.¹³¹ The attack follows several weeks of intensive bombing of the Medya Defense Zones in Metina, and forms part of a wider, years-long campaign by Turkey to remove Kurdistan Workers’ Party fighters from Kurdistan.¹³²

In 2023, Iraq grappled with ongoing challenges to religious freedom amidst political recalibration. The formation of a new Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) offered hope for improved conditions for religious minorities, yet social and political disenfranchisement persisted under both the IFG and the Kurdistan Regional Government.¹²⁰

Sectarian tensions within the IFG threatened stability and hindered efforts to protect diverse religious communities. Meanwhile, disappearances and abductions, repression of freedom of expression, and intensified discrimination underscored ongoing religious freedom concerns.¹²¹

Iraq’s Christian population, having declined sharply during the brutal regime of Daesh, currently consists of fewer than 200,000 people out of a population of more than 41,000,000; roughly 0.46 percent. This dwindling community faces significant societal pressure and discrimination, with conversion from Islam still prohibited by law under threat of severe punishment.¹²²

Despite reserved minority representation in governmental bodies, challenges persisted in ensuring their full participation and protection.¹²³

Overall, Iraq’s complex political landscape, exacerbated by jurisdictional disputes and militia influence, continued to undermine efforts to safeguard religious freedom for the country’s Christians.¹²⁴



COUNTRY PROFILE MOZAMBIQUE



Image: © Ismael Martínez Sánchez/ACN

New Year 2024 saw an upsurge of attacks by Estado Islamico em Mocambique (EIM) or Islamic State of Mozambique in the north-easterly Cabo Delgado Province. They torched 18 churches in Chiúre District over a three-week period in February. As they pressed into Cabo Delgado's southern districts, they carried out the largest sustained campaign against the region's Christians since the militant uprising began in October 2017.

After taking over Mucojo, Macomia District in January 2024, EIM introduced elements of *Shari'a* law, including banning alcohol. In Quissanga District they demanded that non-Muslims pay the *jizya* tax and formed checkpoints to collect road tolls.¹³³ On Sunday 11th February on Macomia road near Muaguide, they killed a driver and burned a car.¹³⁴ EIM's social media played up the religious dimension of the new campaign, showing churches torched and Christian symbols destroyed, including crucifixes.

At the beginning of the period under review (August 2022), it was clear that jihadism had a significant role in the insurgency, which has affected all civilians in the north-east regardless of religion. A source in Pemba Diocese told ACN: "Since July this year it appears that the 'Islamic State' has taken control of the [insurgents]... For us the situation is more sensitive than it was last year because now the Christians are beginning to be targeted and the war is taking on a more religious dimension."¹³⁵

Bishop António Juliasso of Pemba has stressed that endemic poverty and lack of education are driving the Islamist insurrection, rather than religion.¹³⁶ While the key factors leading young Mozambicans to join EIM are not religious, they are supplying jihadism with a fighting force which has led to around 5,000 people being killed and 1 million displaced.¹³⁷

on social media. EIM presented the attacks as a clash between Christianity and Islam.

JUNE 2023 Christian and Muslim leaders announced a new interreligious dialogue and peace initiative aiming to stem armed violence in Cabo Delgado.¹³⁹

FEBRUARY 2024 EIM raided more than 12 villages. Bishop António Juliasso of Pemba said "around a dozen villages, some of them heavily populated, were targeted" and "all the Christian chapels were destroyed". The worst attack took place in "Mazeze, in the administrative posts of the district of Chiúre, where many state-owned public and social infrastructures were destroyed".¹⁴⁰

SELECTED INCIDENTS

SEPTEMBER 2022 Islamists attacked a Catholic mission in Chipene, Nampula Province, on 6th September, killing Sister Maria de Coppi and burning down the library, boarding schools, vehicles and the priests' and nuns' houses. Bishop Alberto Vera Aréjula of Nacala said: "The Sister they murdered worked with malnourished babies and children, they are telling us very clearly they don't want us there."¹³⁸

JANUARY 2023 EIM took responsibility for attacks on two Christian villages – which left two people dead and four injured – posting images of houses torched during the New Year's Eve attack on Namade, Cabo Delgado

CASE STUDY NIGERIAN PRIEST SURVIVES ABDUCTION BY EXTREMISTS



Father Stephen Ojapah is one of many priests who have suffered terribly in the hands of terrorists demanding ransom payments. Between January and November 2023 alone, 23 priests, religious Sisters and seminarians were abducted in Nigeria. Father Stephen was held hostage in inhumane conditions for 33 days at a remote location in north-west Nigeria.

A group of gunmen seized Father Stephen while he was asleep in the middle of the night at the rectory of St Patrick's Catholic Parish in Sokoto Diocese in late May 2022. The assailants also captured three other people staying in the building: assistant priest Father Oliver Okpara and two visitors – siblings Hassan and Ummie Hassan. The siblings had travelled to Sokoto to attend the funeral of Deborah Samuel Yakubu, a Christian student stoned to death by her Muslim peers after allegedly sharing a blasphemous message in a WhatsApp group.

Around 15 extremists entered the rectory and forced Father Stephen and the others to leave with them. Approximately 50 more terrorists were waiting for them outside, and the large group set out to walk a long distance to a forest. Father Stephen gave his shoes to his fellow captive Ms Hassan and proceeded to make the entire journey on rough, rocky terrain barefoot.

They "trekked for two days" before reaching their destination: a camp consisting of makeshift tents and huts. On their arrival, they were "welcomed with a heavy round of beating" – the first of many acts of torture they were to endure.

Father Stephen then encountered four other hostages – a Christian pastor and three members of his church – who had been captured a few days earlier and held in one of the huts. The terrorists went on to chain all their victims together to keep them from escaping.

"The tears kept flowing... Very often we stayed without food the whole day, and we drank very, very dirty water," Father Stephen said. He recounted many other terrible instances of "physical and mental torture," such as regular beatings, whippings, persistent verbal insults and attempts to convert them to Islam.

After a lengthy negotiation process and more than 20 phone calls between the kidnapers and Father Habila Samaila – a priest from Sokoto Diocese who had previously negotiated the release of hostages – Father Stephen and his fellow captives were freed.

Father Stephen subsequently underwent two periods of counselling. In summer 2022, shortly after his release, he received trauma care at a retreat centre in Abuja. In September the same year, he participated in another programme in Kaduna to help him heal from the psychological torment he had experienced.

Father Stephen went on to help establish O-Trauma Victims Initiative, an organisation supporting survivors of abductions and other physical attacks in northern Nigeria. He has come to view the ordeal he had endured "as a unique opportunity to grow and discover more deeply the meaning and purpose of life".



Father Stephen shortly after his release.

COUNTRY PROFILE NICARAGUA



Religious freedom violations in Nicaragua have been escalating over the past two years. The government under President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo has intensified its efforts to suppress the Catholic Church by expelling clergy, forcing Church-run organisations to close and restricting religious activities.¹⁴¹

The Ortega-Murillo regime has cancelled the legal status of numerous Church-affiliated institutions¹⁴² and religious communities, and confiscated their property.¹⁴³ It has also shut down Catholic media outlets and banned religious celebrations in public spaces.¹⁴⁴ President Ortega has even verbally attacked the Catholic Church during a public speech.¹⁴⁵

Dozens of bishops, priests and seminarians were arrested, imprisoned and forced into exile in 2023 and 2024.¹⁴⁶ There is increasing surveillance of Catholic parishes,¹⁴⁷ and government agents routinely harass and intimidate clergy and worshippers.¹⁴⁸ Church personnel who publicly defend human rights or criticise the government can face threats, physical violence and detention.¹⁴⁹

Religious services and events are closely monitored, putting pressure on clergy and the faithful to practise self-censorship.¹⁵⁰ The regime has also banned the public observance of Catholic traditions, such as street processions during Holy Week.¹⁵¹

The government suspended all diplomatic ties with the Holy See and forced its nunciature in Nicaragua to close. The last Vatican diplomat – Monsignor Marcel Diouf, chargé d'affaires of the apostolic nunciature in Nicaragua – left the country in 2023.¹⁵²

SELECTED INCIDENTS

FEBRUARY 2023 Bishop Rolando Álvarez of Matagalpa was sentenced – without trial – to 26 years in prison and stripped of his citizenship for his criticism of the government,¹⁵³ after initially being placed under house arrest.¹⁵⁴

MARCH 2023 The government cancelled the legal status of multiple Catholic institutions and organisations, including John Paul II University, Caritas Nicaragua, Immaculate Conception Catholic University and Santa Luisa de Marillac Technical Institute.¹⁵⁵

AUGUST 2023 The government ordered the confiscation of all assets belonging to the Jesuit-run University of Central America in Managua. Six Jesuit priests were subsequently evicted from their private residence in Managua, despite providing documentation to prove that the house did not belong to the university. On Wednesday 23rd, the Ministry of Interior cancelled the Jesuit religious community's legal status and transferred all of its assets in Nicaragua to the government.¹⁵⁶

OCTOBER 2023 The Nicaraguan regime released 12 Catholic priests from prison and sent them into exile in Rome after reaching an agreement with the Vatican. The government justified the move in a statement saying that the decision demonstrated “the permanent will and commitment to find solutions” to the tensions between Nicaragua and the Vatican.¹⁵⁷

JANUARY 2024 The government expelled 19 representatives of the Catholic Church – Bishop Álvarez, Bishop Isidoro de Carmen Mora Ortega of Siuna, 15 priests and two seminarians – to the Vatican, forcing them into exile. All the men had been imprisoned in Nicaragua prior to their expulsion from the country.¹⁵⁸



COUNTRY PROFILE NIGERIA



Nigeria ranked eighth in the 2024 Global Terrorism Index.¹⁵⁹ Militant Fulani insurgents in the Middle Belt regularly committed massacres and other violent atrocities.¹⁶⁰ Despite Boko Haram/Islamic State: West Africa Province (ISWAP) remaining active in the northern regions, there has been a decrease in attacks, partly because of the Nigerian Armed Forces' counter-insurgency efforts.¹⁶¹

While Muslims are also victims of violence, Christians are disproportionately targeted.¹⁶² Numerous abductions and murders of Church personnel have been reported.¹⁶³ Archbishop Matthew Man-Oso Ndagoso of Kaduna told ACN that kidnappers are often motivated by the prospect of ransom payments.

Acts of terrorism by Fulani insurgents have been timed to coincide with Christian holidays. For instance, militants stormed a number of Christian villages in Plateau State on Christmas Eve 2023, killing hundreds;¹⁶⁴ they also struck on Easter Monday 2024, murdering 10 Christians, including a pregnant woman and her unborn baby.¹⁶⁵ Motivations behind these terrorist attacks apparently include territorial gain, Islamist jihadism and ethnic tensions. However, the prevalent political and media narrative tends to cite climate change and societal tensions as the primary reasons for the violence, refusing to acknowledge any religious aspect¹⁶⁶ – despite evidence showing Fulani insurgents have been trained by jihadist group Boko Haram.¹⁶⁷

In the period under review the Nigerian federal government has failed to take any meaningful actions to prevent attacks by Fulani extremist groups.¹⁶⁸ The authorities are often slow in responding to mass killings,¹⁶⁹ and attackers are rarely identified and held to account.¹⁷⁰

Despite Christians making up almost half of the total population, those living in the northern regions are dominated politically by the Muslim majority, and are subject to faith-based discrimination in education and employment.¹⁷¹ *Shari'a* law has been implemented in 12 of the country's 36 northerly states, and a number of individuals have been detained after being accused of blasphemy.¹⁷²

SELECTED INCIDENTS

MAY 2023 January 2023 Father Isaac Achi was burnt alive and Father Collins Omeh suffered gunshot wounds when gunmen attacked the presbytery of Sts Peter and Paul Catholic Church in Kafin Koro, Niger State on Sunday 15th.¹⁷³

APRIL 2023 More than 35 people died and up to 40 were injured on Good Friday 2023 when terrorists opened fire at a camp for internally displaced people in Benue State.¹⁷⁴

JUNE 2023 Father Charles Igechi, aged 33, was killed by unidentified gunmen while carrying out pastoral duties in Benin City, Edo State less than a year after his ordination.¹⁷⁵

DECEMBER 2023 More than 300 people died and hundreds more were injured after hundreds of extremists stormed dozens of Christian villages in coordinated attacks on Christmas Eve 2023 near Bokkos, Plateau State.¹⁷⁶

APRIL 2024 Suspected Fulani militants struck three villages near Bokkos, Plateau State on Easter Monday (1st April) 2024, killing 10 Christians including a pregnant woman and her unborn baby.¹⁷⁷ In the same region the following week, on Friday 12th, suspected Fulani militants went on a three-day rampage in Pankshin Diocese in Nigeria's Middle Belt, killing 29 Christians, injuring a further two, and burning down churches and homes.¹⁷⁸



COUNTRY PROFILE NORTH KOREA



North Korea functions as a totalitarian regime, heavily influenced by a personality cult centered on the Kim dynasty, which has ruled for three generations since the end of World War II. The sole accepted 'religion' is Juche, an ideology of Marxist 'self-reliance' created by the country's founder, Kim Il-Sung.¹⁷⁹

Currently, Christianity is regarded as a significant threat to the state's supremacy and the Kim family's dominance, forcing it to operate covertly. Gauging the true number of Christians or the extent of their faith in North Korea is exceedingly difficult, however they are estimated to comprise around 0.38 percent of the population, which equates to just over 98,000 people.¹⁸⁰

Christians in North Korea face extreme persecution. Anyone identified as a Christian or showing interest in Christianity or the Bible will almost certainly be considered an enemy of the state.¹⁸¹

Those discovered practising Christianity can be sent to labour camps, where they endure starvation and torture. The government enforces strict loyalty, requiring citizens to act as informants, and indoctrinates children to report on their parents. Thus, Christians in North Korea must be exceedingly discreet in their expressions and actions. If a Christian is apprehended, their entire family is subjected to punishment.¹⁸²

SELECTED INCIDENTS

APRIL 2023 Authorities in Tongam village, South Pyongan Province, arrested a group of five Christians for their religious activities and confiscated dozens of Bibles. The Christians reportedly refused to renounce their faith and disclose the Bibles' origin.¹⁸³

MAY 2023 An entire family, including a two-year-old child, was condemned to life imprisonment for possessing a Bible.¹⁸⁴

MAY 2023 A Christian man held in a detention centre was almost beaten to death by prison guards after he was discovered to be secretly praying. Despite the assault leaving him with near-fatal injuries, the man continued to pray daily, even though his dedication

to his faith resulted in guards regularly beating him with a club and kicking him.¹⁸⁵

APRIL 2024 Among the more than 200 North Korean defectors repatriated from China in 2023, those found to have interacted with Christians while in China were sent to prison camps. Without exception, any defectors found to have read the Bible or to have been exposed to Christian doctrine were sentenced to hard labour.¹⁸⁶

MAY 2024 The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Report 2024 recommended that the US State Department redesignates North Korea a Country of Particular Concern, based on the conditions of religious freedom within the country throughout 2023.¹⁸⁷

CASE STUDY

WORST TREATMENT METED OUT TO NORTH KOREA'S CHRISTIAN DEFECTORS

Fears were expressed over the fate of defectors repatriated from China to North Korea in October 2023 who were found to have interacted with Christians while out of the country. All of them were sent to political prison camps, renowned for their harsh treatment of inmates.

Most of the repatriated defectors were held in some sort of incarceration, indeed there were reports of many of these serving reduced sentences. However, this was not the case for those who came into contact with Christianity – their incarceration in political camps effectively means a life sentence without parole.

A source who spoke to *Daily NK*, who remained anonymous for security reasons, explained that North Korean state security departments base their interrogations of repatriated defectors on case files provided by the Chinese police. If the files mention anything related to religion, the defectors cannot avoid being sentenced to the camps, no matter what excuses or explanations they offer.

North Korea is widely regarded as the worst country in the world in which to be a Christian: the country's Songbun system categorises citizens according to their loyalty to the state, and religious believers are automatically classified as "hostile" and subjected to acute persecution. While there are blanket human rights abuses and religious oppression throughout the country, affecting all walks of life and all faith groups, Christians and followers of the shamanistic religion Mugyo are particularly targeted according to the US State Department.

Illyong Ju, a North Korean defector who is now an activist, reported that "It is said that they are forcing [the repatriated defectors] to confess in advance information about the remaining 1,000 people who have not yet been repatriated to North Korea." He went on to state that, among the defectors, "there must be people who believe in Jesus. They will spread the gospel wherever they go. Just like Sister Kim, who works with me, evangelised to eight people while she was in a North Korean prison due to forced repatriation. Therefore, we have faith that the people who were forcibly repatriated to North Korea will become amazing people of God who rise up against the oppression of the North Korean regime."

According to the *2023 Report on International Religious Freedom* released by the US State Department, an estimated 50,000-70,000 North Koreans are in prison camps simply for being Christians.

Sources: Seulkee Jang, "Repatriated N. Korean defectors who interacted with Christians sent to political prison camps", *Daily NK*, 24th April 2024 <https://www.dailynk.com/english/repatriated-north-korean-defectors-interacted-christians-sent-political-prison-camps/> [accessed 24/07/24].

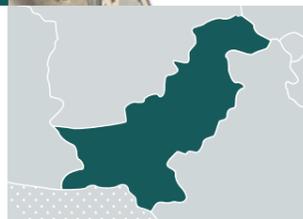
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COUNTRY PROFILE

PAKISTAN



The August 2023 mob attacks on Christians in the Punjab's Jaranwala district, resulting in the torching of more than 25 churches,¹⁸⁸ highlighted concerns about increasing persecution.¹⁸⁹ Research showed that “terrorist attacks targeting religious minorities and places of worship significantly increased” in 2023.¹⁹⁰ Christians suffered repeated harassment, false accusations, discrimination in the courts as well as in schools and the workplace. Anecdotal reports suggested a “rise in abductions, forced marriages and conversions of underage girls and young women” from Christian and other religious minority backgrounds.¹⁹¹

In August 2023, Pakistan's Senate passed a bill to increase sentences for derogatory remarks against revered personalities close to Islam's Prophet.¹⁹² Given the widespread abuse of blasphemy laws, the proposed legislation raised concerns. In March 2023 research showed that 2,120 individuals had been accused of blasphemy between 1987 and 2022, with increased abuse of related legislation over the period.¹⁹³ More than half of the cases involved minorities, despite them comprising 1.9 percent of the total population.

In January 2024 the federal government withdrew the requirement for non-Muslim students to study Islam. The Curriculum for Religious Education 2023 enabled minorities to “delve deeper into topics and contents relating to their religion”.¹⁹⁴ But human rights observers noted that “religious content against minorities” in curriculum and textbooks increased, posing “a number of perennial and new challenges... in the education system”.¹⁹⁵

As the “poorest of the poor”, Christians are especially susceptible to persecution.¹⁹⁶ Described as bonded labourers, Christians comprise 20 percent of brick-kiln workers, and in some places up to 80 percent.¹⁹⁷ Many of them are at mortal risk, lacking protective equipment.

SELECTED INCIDENTS

JANUARY 2023 UN experts expressed alarm at the reported rise in abductions and forced marriage and conversion of underage girls and young women from Christian and other religious minorities in Pakistan and urged immediate action to curtail its practice and implement justice for victims.¹⁹⁸

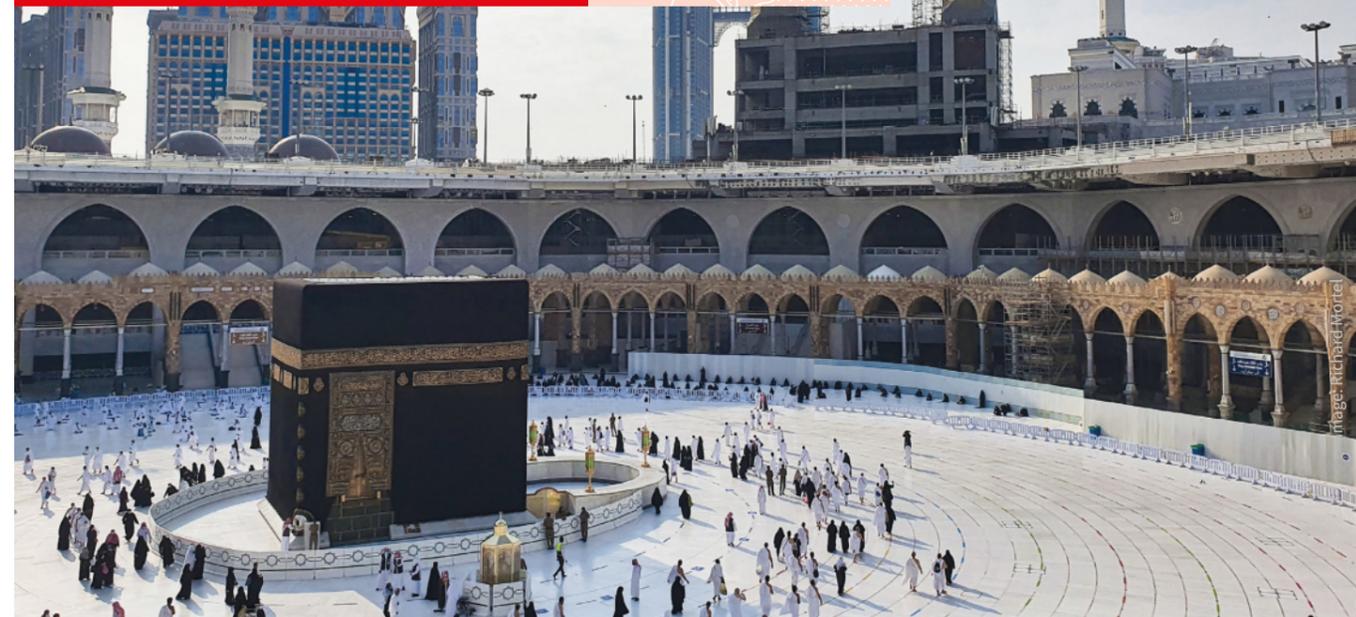
AUGUST 2023 More than 25 churches and 80 homes belonging to Christians were torched when a mob of thousands armed with high explosives and other weapons went on the rampage in the Punjab district of Jaranwala¹⁹⁹ (see case study on p. 35).

MARCH 2024 The United Presbyterian Church in Gujar Khan, near Islamabad, was gutted by fire the day before Easter. Police said the blaze was caused by a short circuit but 500 Christians gathered in front of the church calling on the authorities to investigate local businessman Sheikh Ahmad. The owner of an under-construction shopping centre, Mr Ahmad had objected to police tents and barricades erected in the area as part of Good Friday security arrangements.²⁰⁰

MAY-JUNE 2024 Christian grandfather Nazir Gill Masih, 73, from Sargodha, died from his injuries after being lynched by a mob of thousands. The mob accused Mr Masih of desecrating the *Qur'an*, and his home and shoe factory were torched. Reports suggested the incident was motivated by business rivalry and personal disputes. The violence triggered a mass exodus of Christians from the neighbourhood.²⁰¹

COUNTRY PROFILE

SAUDI ARABIA



Islam is the official religion of Saudi Arabia and the country's 1992 Basic Law of Governance establishes the *Qur'an* and Sunna as the “formal” constitution. The legal system is based on Hanbali interpretations of *Shari'a* law.²⁰² Religious freedom is not protected under the law, which criminalises actions that challenge the religion or authority of the King or Crown Prince. The law prohibits promoting atheistic beliefs, undermining Islamic principles, publishing content against Islamic law, public non-Islamic worship, displaying non-Islamic symbols, converting Muslims to other religions, and proselytising by non-Muslims.²⁰³

Converting from Islam to Christianity is strictly prohibited. Men found to have converted are forced to leave their homes, while women face confinement and abuse within

their families. Converts can face honour killings. Most Saudi Christians conceal their faith, even from their families, out of fear of reprisals.²⁰⁴

Similarly, foreign Christians face severe restrictions. Immigrants are forbidden from evangelising Muslims or holding church gatherings, with violations leading to possible detention and deportation. An unofficial census by the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia estimates that Saudi Arabia's Catholics number 1.5 million, mainly foreign workers from India and the Philippines. Already vulnerable due to their ethnicity and low social standing, these migrants may face additional persecution for their Christian faith, especially if they converted from Islam.²⁰⁵

SELECTED INCIDENTS

MAY 2023 The Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) issued a report which found “almost all examples portraying Christians and Jews in a negative manner” had been removed from the latest Saudi textbooks. However, certain instances of this still persist.²⁰⁶

OCTOBER 2023 The Apostolic Vicariates of Northern Arabia and Southern Arabia celebrated the 1,500th Jubilee Year of St Arethas and his Companions, in the hope it will renew and strengthen the faith of the Christians living in the region today.²⁰⁷

JANUARY 2024 Open Doors reported in their World Watch List that a female convert from Islam to Christianity was beaten, locked in her room, verbally abused, and forced to marry a Muslim after her family found Christian text messages on her phone.²⁰⁸

MAY 2024 The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Report 2024 recommended that the US State Department redesignates Saudi Arabia a Country of Particular Concern, based on the conditions of religious freedom within the country throughout 2023.²⁰⁹

COUNTRY PROFILE

SUDAN



The civil war that broke out on 15th April 2023 unleashed a wave of violence and displacement affecting all communities across Sudan. Several significant churches were among religious buildings targeted in the war's opening weeks.²¹⁰ Many churches in the Khartoum area and elsewhere were immediately seized by military forces.²¹¹ By mid-May, this included the Virgin Mary Coptic Orthodox Cathedral and All Saints' Episcopal Cathedral, both in Khartoum.²¹² In the following months, up to 165 churches were closed and others destroyed.²¹³

By early 2024 human rights observers began describing Sudan's internal displacement crisis as "the highest in the world"²¹⁴ – with the UN stating record levels of children were suffering malnutrition due to food scarcity.²¹⁵ By that time, the Church, which had been 5 percent of the population (2.4 million) before the conflict, was "shrinking away".²¹⁶ While many Christians migrated to their ancestral homelands in South Sudan, Church sources reported that the faithful made up the majority of the 750,000 or more people who took refuge in the Nuba Mountains.²¹⁷

In the two years leading up to the civil war, the regime that came to power in a coup in October 2021 began reversing a process towards "liberalisation and religious freedom"²¹⁸ undertaken by the transitional government. The transitional government (2019-21) had restored Christmas Day as a public holiday,²¹⁹ issued an apology for the country's long record of persecution against Christians²²⁰ and abolished the death penalty for apostasy offences.²²¹ All this changed after the coup when reports began to emerge of Christians being arrested in alleged breach of anti-apostasy laws.²²²

SELECTED INCIDENTS

DECEMBER 2022 The Sudanese Church of Christ's Dawka Church in Gedaref State was burned down. Local media blamed the blaze on a soldier from the Sudanese Armed Forces. Church leaders filed a case against the man.²²³

APRIL 2023 The start of the civil war triggered attacks against prominent churches in the Khartoum area. St Girgis' Coptic Orthodox Church in Old Omdurman was targeted during a Sunday service. Three worshippers and a guard were shot at, and the local bishop was seriously injured. Military forces occupied the Virgin Mary Coptic Orthodox Cathedral, reportedly destroying buildings and forcibly expelling the local bishop and other clergy. A week later they stormed All Saints' Episcopal Cathedral Khartoum. Many other churches in the capital were seized on the first day of the conflict. That same day, bombers attacked the Catholic Bishop's House in El Obeid. The bishop took refuge in the neighbouring cathedral.²²⁴

NOVEMBER 2023 A Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church in Omdurman was shelled three times, causing serious damage. Everything inside was destroyed. Several people in the church compound at the time were unharmed.²²⁵

JANUARY 2024 Bishop Yunan Tombe of El Obeid was stopped just outside the city centre by extremists. Calling him an infidel, they seized his pectoral cross and episcopal ring.²²⁶

CASE STUDY

PAKISTANI CHRISTIAN QUARTER CONSUMED BY FLAMES

16th August 2023 is a day that "will ever haunt" the Christians of Jaranwala, in Pakistan's Punjab Province and far beyond.

Over 12 hours, within Jaranwala city and nine majority-Christian districts, 26 churches and other places of worship were desecrated and the homes of more than 80 Christians were burnt.

Amid reports that the attacks were pre-meditated and drew on extensive intelligence regarding the whereabouts of churches and Christian homes across the region, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Pakistan described the attacks as the "worst incident against Christians" in the nation's history.

Early that day, mosques in the area used their loudspeakers to broadcast blasphemy allegations against two Christians, Rocky and Raja Masih, from Jaranwala.

The illiterate brothers were accused of desecrating the *Qur'an*. Torn pages were found in a Christian district of Jaranwala, complete with photographs of the brothers and their contact details.

Shortly after, more than a dozen people descended on the brothers' home. Their sister, Sadia Sahil, stated: "They threatened us, saying they will burn us and our house." She explained that her husband saved their eight-month-old daughter just before their home was set ablaze.

By 8am that morning, a mob of 2,000 people had gathered and began heading for the town, prompting Christians to flee. Many of the attackers were reportedly from militant group Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan. Within an hour, the attackers, armed with guns and explosives, had begun setting fire to churches in the region. Social media buzzed with footage of pews and sacred objects being thrown out of churches, torched and smashed. Video clips from a cemetery showed cross-shaped gravestones being smashed.

Some local Muslims refused to allow the mob to enter their villages. Prominent resident Nazim Zafar Iqbal called together youth from 238 Pathan Chak to block the path of the militants. He told the attackers: "You guys go back. Otherwise, the matter will escalate. To reach the village church you will have to drop dead bodies and those dead bodies will not be ours alone."

In the days that followed, senior politicians including Pakistan

Caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar visited Jaranwala to express solidarity with victims. The Punjab government approved compensation of ₹2 million (UK£5,660) to each of the affected families in Jaranwala.

The authorities were accused of failure to stop the attacks. The following February, the Supreme Court of Pakistan dismissed the authorities' report into their response to the attack. Chief Justice Qazi Faez said the document was worthy of "being thrown in the bin".

Bishop Indrias Rehmat of Faisalabad told ACN of his dismay amid reports of the gradual release of many of the 300 people arrested. He said: "We want justice. The culprits must be brought to justice."

Sources: "Caretaker PM visits Jaranwala, expresses solidarity with Christian families", *Ary News*, 21st August 2023 <https://arynews.tv/caretaker-pm-visits-jaranwala-expresses-solidarity-with-christians/> [accessed 17/07/24].

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ACN aid for the victims.

COUNTRY PROFILE

SYRIA



While Syria's civil war has affected all faiths, ethnicities and other groups, in terms of displacement and migration, the Christian community has been affected "disproportionately".²²⁷ Christians, who were more than 1.5 million before the war began in 2011,²²⁸ have been reduced to as few as 250,000²²⁹ amid growing fears for the Church's very survival in some parts of the country.²³⁰

In northern Syria, much-reduced Christian groups face different pressures. In the north-western Idlib governorate, Islamist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) declared an end to persecution of Christians by, for example, allowing the re-opening of the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Anna, closed for 10 years.²³¹ But HTS continued to ban religious practices and seize property, in some cases converting buildings into mosques.²³² Clergy have recounted attempts to erase Christian symbols from churches and monasteries. Christians in Idlib region have fallen from 20,000 faithful to barely 600²³³ and in some areas "approached extinction".²³⁴ The February 2023 earthquake triggered further waves of migration.²³⁵

In Al-Hassake, north-east Syria, an escalation of Turkish attacks²³⁶ and security fears severely hampered the Christian community's recovery. Senior clergy report that there are now no Assyrian Christians left in 30 villages previously occupied by Daesh (ISIS).²³⁷

In the 70 percent²³⁸ of the country under Assad government control, the state has declared a pro-Christian policy. However, the mass migration of the last decade, triggered by extreme anti-Christian persecution, continues apace, largely driven by severe economic hardship. Aleppo's Christians, formerly 250,000-strong (12 percent of the region's population) fell to 30,000 (1.4 percent), according to Syria's apostolic nuncio Cardinal Mario Zenari. In April 2024 he reported that 500 Syrian Christians were leaving Syria every day. He said: "We see the churches die."²³⁹

SELECTED INCIDENTS

DECEMBER 2022 Christians in Idlib reported that HTS still massively restricted Christmas worship, limiting prayers to church halls and prohibiting bell ringing.²⁴⁰

DECEMBER 2022 Describing a visit to Hassaké-Nisibi Archdiocese, Syriac Catholic Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan said Christian numbers had collapsed from 100,000 in the 1970s to less than 20,000. He added: "This poses a most dangerous challenge for our survival in the land."²⁴¹

MARCH 2023 Northern Syria's Christian community has been "irrevocably damaged".²⁴² Areas formerly controlled by jihadists and others seized by Turkish-backed forces have been nearly emptied of indigenous Christian populations. Christians in Raqqa have declined from 11,000 in 2011 to barely 100. Over the same period Christians in Deir ez-Zor, which previously numbered nearly 5,000, have all but disappeared, and Assyrian Christians in Khabour Valley have shrunk from 15,000 to less than 1,000.²⁴³

SEPTEMBER 2023 Desperate Christians in Syria and Lebanon suffering extreme poverty "no longer have confidence in their country" and "there is no light at the end of the tunnel", according to the Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Youssef Absi. He said: "We are doing everything possible to help our faithful, to provide them with essential services.... Without support, we can no longer convince them to stay." The Patriarch said the situation could improve if the West lifted sanctions.²⁴⁴

NOVEMBER 2023 Nazira Gawriya, co-chair of the Syriac Union Party, said Christians are at risk from a resurgence of Daesh, especially in the north-east. She said Daesh may exploit Syrian security weakness caused by an escalation of attacks by Turkey. Ms Gawriya said the country's much-diminished Christian presence faces an existential threat as a result of displacement caused by the violence.²⁴⁵

COUNTRY PROFILE

TURKEY



The August 2020 announcement that Istanbul's Hagia Sophia and Chora museums – which were built as Christian churches – would formally be redesignated as mosques was highly controversial. While plans went ahead at the Hagia Sophia, the Chora scheme stalled after UNESCO's World Heritage Committee expressed concerns.²⁴⁶ However, in May 2024 Islamic prayer resumed at the former Chora Church.

Current legal interpretations of the 1923 Lausanne Treaty only grant legal minority status to Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Greek Orthodox Christians and Jews. Despite their special status, they have no legal identity and cannot corporately buy or own properties or seek legal redress. The same applies to other minority groups including Catholics and Protestants. Currently, these groups can only own property through separate foundations.

Despite these restrictions, in October 2023 St Ephrem's Syriac Orthodox Church, the first new church to be built with government approval since modern Turkey was founded, was officially opened with President Recep Erdoğan in attendance. Church sources in the country told ACN there are also indications that the government will issue building permits for more new churches.

Christian communities also continue to face certain restrictions on the training of clergy. Protestant communities cannot train clergy in the country and largely rely on foreign-born ministers.²⁴⁷ The Greek Orthodox Church's Halki Seminary has been shut for more than half a century²⁴⁸ and so, like the Armenian Orthodox Church, sends candidates for the priesthood abroad for studies.

The elimination of bureaucratic difficulties preventing the return of Christians who emigrated from Turkey was praised by Fr Gabriel Akyuz of the Syriac Orthodox Church of the 40 Martyrs, Mardin. He paid tribute to Turkey's President Erdogan and the ruling AK Party government, noting "the state's highest authorities [have given] assurances to Assyrians that they can safely return to their country."²⁴⁹ However, fears were rekindled when 91-year-old Syriac Orthodox returnee Gevriye Akgüç was shot dead in Anhil, Mardin in November 2023.²⁵⁰

SELECTED INCIDENTS

JANUARY 2024 Two gunmen killed a man during Sunday Mass in the Church of Santa Maria in Istanbul. The uncle of the dead man said the victim was a 52-year-old catechumen. Daesh (ISIS) claimed responsibility for the murder.²⁵¹

FEBRUARY 2024 Written questions were sent to Minister of Education Yusuf Tekin over a manual sent to all schools, which stated they were forbidden to mark Christian holidays.²⁵²

APRIL 2024 Christians were angered when the historic St Mary's Church in Goydun village, Sivas Province, was put up for sale for ₺16 million (c.US\$500,000). The nineteenth-century church was being sold by local resident Hatice Akay, whose family acquired it after the Armenian Genocide. Registered as a protected cultural property, its sale should be unlawful.²⁵³

MAY 2024 Islamic prayers recommenced at the historic Chora Church on Monday 6th. President Erdoğan presided over the opening ceremony via video link. The fourth-century church first became a mosque in 1511, following the fall of Constantinople. It was converted into a museum in 1945, because of its historically significant mosaics and frescoes from the late Byzantine period. Chora is a UN World Heritage Site.²⁵⁴

JUNE 2024 A court case brought to light that the Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı intelligence agency had been secretly monitoring members of Protestant communities over several years, marking foreign-born clerics' files with code N-82. This identified clergy as threats to national security, and in practice made re-entry into the country extremely difficult.²⁵⁵



COUNTRY PROFILE

VIETNAM

Vietnam has been uneven and inconsistent in its implementation of religious freedom. While steps were taken to facilitate the registration of religious groups (see December 2023), some still experienced difficulties registering.²⁵⁶ Decree 95 – a set of guidelines for uniformly implementing the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion, which should ease the registration of churches – was criticised for allowing local government to suspend religious activities for unspecified “serious violations” without giving reasons.²⁵⁷

Ethnic Christian groups in Vietnam’s highlands continued to be persecuted, with incidents including services being disrupted or worse (see March 2024). The push to shut down unregistered groups in the region continues, and in particular there has been a concerted effort to eradicate the ethnic H’Mong church founded by Pastor Dương Văn Minh.²⁵⁸

There also continue to be tensions over religious buildings requisitioned by the state from 1954 onwards. Despite more recent directives to return these to religious groups or another competent body where it was not being properly used, some authorities have continued to let third parties exploit religious groups’ property.²⁵⁹

But the Catholic Church has seen a thawing of relations with the state: a major breakthrough occurred when its work during the COVID-19 epidemic (e.g. distributing food) won respect from authorities.²⁶⁰ Relations have continued to develop and in 2024 Archbishop Marek Zalewski became the first resident Papal Representative in the country since 1975. Improved relations have fuelled speculation that Pope Francis could be the first pope to visit Vietnam.

SELECTED INCIDENTS

NOVEMBER 2023 Father Joseph Nguyễn Văn Hội, head of Hà Nội’s Redemptorist community, appealed for the return of monastic buildings seized after the Communist takeover. The novitiate and study centre buildings are currently used by Đống Đa Hospital. Fr Văn Hội said “The building was originally built as our monastery and is wholly unsuitable to function as a hospital.”²⁶¹

DECEMBER 2023 The Vietnam Full Gospel Church, which has c.11,000 members, was formally recognised as a religious organisation. Founded in 1990, it was licensed to operate in 2018.²⁶²

JANUARY 2024 Nay Y Blang, whose house in Phú Yên Province was used as a meeting place for the Central Highlands Evangelical Church of Christ, was sentenced to four years and six months in jail for “gathering forces, dividing the national unity bloc, inciting secession, self-rule, and establishing a separate state for ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands” during religious meetings in his home. According to family, he had no defence lawyer at his trial. In a similar case, Rian Thih was jailed in Gia Lai Province.²⁶³

MARCH 2024 Police detained three members of a house church in Ea Khit village, Đắk Lắk Province, Central Highlands, on Thursday 4th. Y Qui Bdap, his son Y Năm Bkrông and his nephew Y Kic were released after a week in prison.²⁶⁴

APRIL 2024 Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Vatican Secretary for Relations with States and International Organisations, spent six days in the country, meeting with Foreign Affairs Minister Bùi Thanh Sơn and Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính.²⁶⁵

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Around the world Christians are finding themselves subject to increased risk of harassment, arrest and violence – churches are burnt, Christian women are abducted and raped, and the faithful are killed for their beliefs. *Persecuted and Forgotten?* provides detailed information regarding the situation of Christians in 18 countries where the faithful are suffering because of state authoritarianism or attacks from extremists.



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Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) is a Catholic charity bringing spiritual and practical help to Christians – especially those who are persecuted for their beliefs. We carry out our mission of reconciliation and love through local Church partners: supporting priests, Sisters and catechists, building churches, providing transport, training seminarians, and providing religious literature and media – as well as supplying emergency aid for Christians struggling to survive or fleeing persecution. ACN also advocates on behalf of suffering Christians denied a voice. Through prayer, information and action we are keeping the Faith alive in a troubled world.

ALTERNATIVE CASE STUDY 3 - PAGE 27 and contents page 2

For those offices that do not want to run two case studies on Nigeria, we are providing an alternative case study 3 (on Vietnam) for p. 27. This follows immediately.

Please note 1 that if this alternative case study is used, it will require **changing** the text in **the contents on page two** from:

Case Study 3 Nigerian priest survives abduction by extremists	27
to	
Case Study 3 Historic Church representative arrives in Vietnam	27

ALTERNATIVE CONTENTS PAGE PROVIDED BELOW

Please note 2 that national offices will need to change the details of the publisher and printer at the foot of page two.

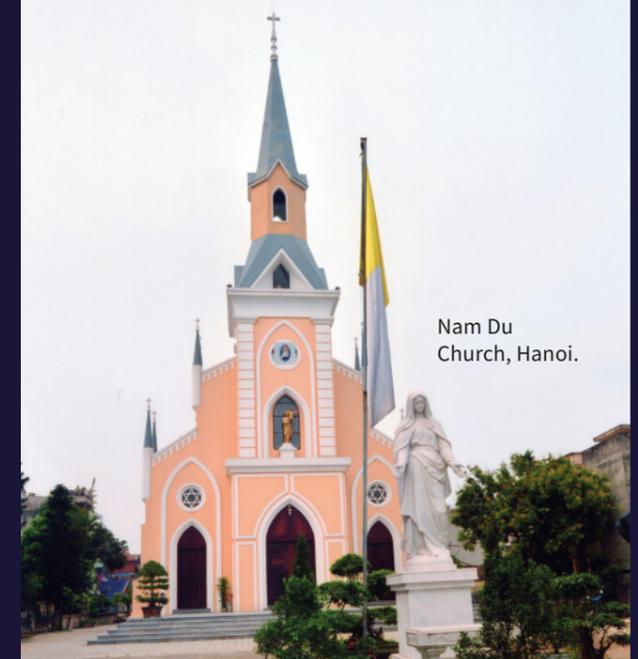
CASE STUDY

HISTORIC CHURCH REPRESENTATIVE ARRIVES IN VIETNAM

On 31st January 2024, Archbishop Marek Zalewski arrived at Archbishop's House in Hanoi to formally start his role as the first resident papal representative in Vietnam for almost half a century. As he took up the historic appointment, he was welcomed by 16 bishops and numerous priests, as well as religious and seminarians. Archbishop Zalewski told his welcomers: "I am here to serve the Catholic Church in Vietnam."

The archbishop will initially be based at the Pan Pacific Hotel about 1¼ (2km) from Archbishop's House, until the government and Vatican finalise plans for a permanent residence. Redemptorist Father James Đinh Xuân Toàn said there had been calls on social media for authorities to return the building next door to Archbishop's House which was used by apostolic delegates from 1951 to 1959. It was requisitioned by the state and, since 2008, has been a public library, having previously been used as a restaurant, discotheque and bar. Father Toàn added: "At the moment the government may save face by giving a proper plot of land to the Holy See to build a new building for the resident papal envoy." Speaking on condition of anonymity, one priest told UCA News: "The government is likely to grant a plot of land in Tây Hồ District for the Holy See to build the office."

Another priest, who also spoke on condition of anonymity, said local Catholics are delighted by the development, and believe the Polish prelate is a perfect choice. He said: "He will know how to deal with challenges and problems facing the local church because he is from Poland, which was ruled by communists." The priest, who comes from the highlands, where ethnic Christians often experience problems from state intervention, said there are difficulties with parishes not being recognised by local authorities, who have sometimes been slow to grant new buildings for growing congregations. Independent protestant groups are often subjected to oppression and persecution. He said: "We fully expect [Archbishop] Marek to visit ethnic communities in remote areas and make their voice heard."



Nam Du Church, Hanoi.

The appointment was made possible after agreement was reached between the Holy See and the country's government. It was signed by Vietnamese President Võ Văn Thưởng during a visit in the Vatican in July 2023. A joint communique stated: "the two sides had expressed great appreciation for the significant progress in bilateral relations and the positive contributions made so far by the country's Catholic community." 60-year-old Archbishop Zalewski was appointed by Pope Francis four months later.

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Archbishop Marek Zalewski, flanked by two brother priests during his time as papal nuncio in Zimbabwe.

Persecuted and Forgotten?

A REPORT ON CHRISTIANS
OPPRESSED FOR THEIR FAITH
2022–2024

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Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2022-24

Cover image: A woman comforts her child after the August 2023 violence in Jaranwala (© NCJP). See p. 35.

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