

 *OpenDoors*

**WORLD
WATCH
LIST** 2025

ADVOCACY REPORT



INTERNATIONAL EDITION

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

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INTRODUCTION

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF AND OPEN DOORS' WORLD WATCH LIST

Open Doors' mission is to strengthen the church in the places where Christians face the most severe persecution and discrimination. Our World Watch List began as a way of identifying the places where Open Doors needed to focus its work. **This year's research has found that more than 380 million Christians around the world face high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith. If 1 in 7 Christians, according to the World Watch List, are facing high levels of opposition how many other faith groups are also affected?**

Open Doors' global ministry was started by Brother Andrew smuggling Bibles into Communist countries behind the Iron Curtain in the 1950s. It later developed into an organization that not only provides practical and spiritual support to Christians facing hardships on account of their faith, but also passionately speaks up for religious freedom for everyone. If one faith group deserves freedom, it must mean that all other religious or belief groups are entitled to enjoy their rights to an equal degree.

Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is set out in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). It states that everyone has the right to change their religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest their religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. FoRB is at the core of one's conviction, conscience and a sense of belonging. It is of utmost importance that governments and international players continuously monitor observance of FoRB and related rights, for they are challenged in many countries, even where FoRB is enshrined in constitutions.

We hope this research and report will bring attention to the plight of Christians and other religious groups under pressure. We must talk about it and we must take action. Thank you for standing with us.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report urges governments and international organisations to recognize and maintain FoRB as a key priority in foreign policy. Examples of Christians communities worldwide demonstrate the urgency of the situation.

Research for the 2025 World Watch List finds that more than 380 million Christians around the world face high levels of persecution or discrimination because of their faith.

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

- ***The complete denial of human rights faced by Christians in North Korea.*** Christians in the country risk being sent to prison camps, face surveillance and discrimination in all areas of life, and are in danger of being forcibly returned to the country if they try to escape to China.
- ***Growing authoritarianism in Central Asia.*** Several incidents of violence against Christians in countries in this region were reported in the past year, alongside excessive state surveillance and restrictions on Christian gatherings.
- ***Iran's continuing refusal to recognise Persian-speaking converts.*** The Iranian government spreads disinformation against Persian-speaking Christians with a Muslim background, who are often imprisoned for their faith. Converts are also increasingly subject to state surveillance.



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

- **Restrictions on the right to peaceful assembly for Christians around the world.** Our research records many attacks on Christians who meet for worship. In some cases, extremists or vigilantes disrupt these gatherings: in others, the state imposes registration requirements which prevent Christians from meeting together. The situation in Algeria is of particular concern in this regard.
- **Attacks on the church in Latin America.** Christians also face discrimination or hostility in some countries where they are the religious majority. In Latin American countries such as Nicaragua or Cuba, the authorities target churches and Christian leaders who criticise them.
- **The rapid rise of digital persecution.** New technology is allowing authoritarian governments (especially China) to restrict Christian communities through surveillance. This has only intensified due to the growth in artificial intelligence (AI). Elsewhere, extremists are using drones in their attacks. The implications for freedom of religion or belief are only now beginning to be discussed.

The report also sets out the challenges faced by Christians in contexts of displacement. Open Doors research shows that Christian refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) are additionally vulnerable to persecution, discrimination or hostility based on their faith. This report explores:

- **A displacement crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa.** The Sahel region has become a hotspot for forced displacement driven by a combination of extremist violence, environmental crises and socio-political instability. Areas of particular concern include Nigeria and Burkina Faso, which has seen many cases of extremist violence against Christians, and Sudan, where the ongoing civil war has left Christian communities exposed.
- **Challenges in aid distribution.** Open Doors research has found that displaced Christians can face discrimination in accessing humanitarian aid. In Nigeria's Borno State, for instance, Christian IDPs reported systemic exclusion from government-run aid programmes.
- **Attacks on Christians from many sides in Yemen.** Christians are at risk of discrimination in aid distribution, as well as violence from extremists taking advantage of the country's civil war and humanitarian crisis. Christians and others can be forced to flee their homes, either temporarily or permanently, and may even be forced out of the country.

NORTH KOREA: complete denial of rights

North Korea has been at the top of the Open Doors World Watch List for all but one year since 2002.

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

CHRISTIANITY IN NORTH KOREA

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

PRISON CAMPS

If discovered by the North Korean government, Christians face deportation to a political prison camp, hard labour or execution. Sharing one’s faith or bringing religious literature into the country may lead to detention and forced labour. Choi Chun-gil, Kim Jung-wook and Kim Kook-kie were detained as political prisoners in 2013. All three have been held incommunicado after receiving life sentences in 2015.¹

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

LEGAL DISCRIMINATION

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

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

North Korean women and girls who escape to China are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking. Victims are usually trafficked from North Korea on false offers of employment, and later sold as brides or sex slaves into China or other south east Asian countries. Victims are trafficked to the border and then transported to safe houses, brothels or buyers. Sexual violence and rape are common during these journeys.² Some of these trafficked women and girls encounter churches and missionaries and convert to Christianity – they may face severe persecution as a result if forcibly returned to North Korea.

FORCED RETURN

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

¹ CSW, 2024, [Urgent appeal calling for the release and return of three South Korean missionaries](#)

² Hee-soon, Yoon, 2019, ‘Sex Slaves: The Prostitution, Cybersex & Forced Marriage of North Korean Women & Girls in China’. London: Korea Future Initiative

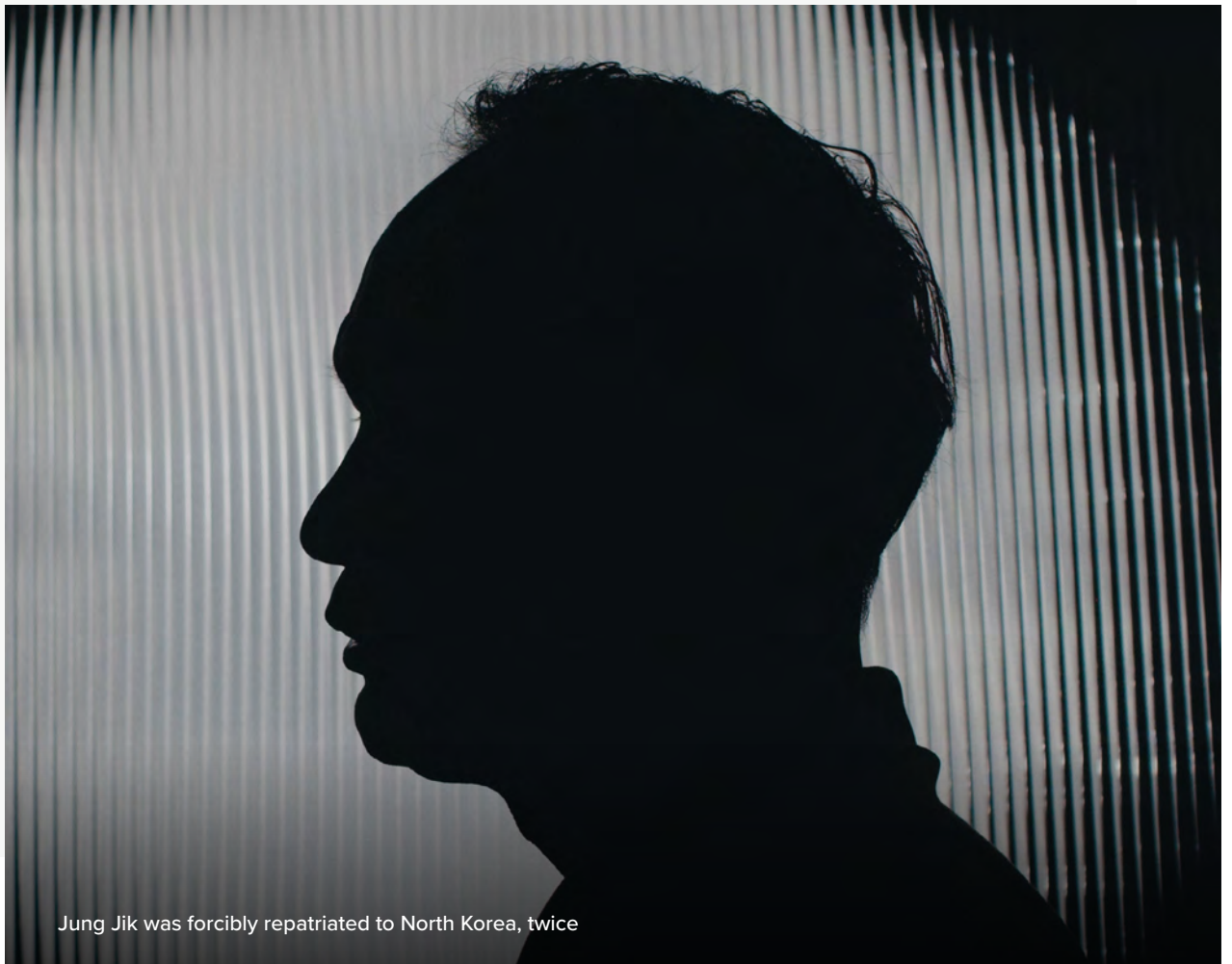
CASE STUDY: JUNG JIK

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

Jung's father was the first of his family to flee to another country. After escaping, he discovered that his grandfather was a famous Korean martyr who was murdered by North Korean soldiers during the Korean War. Jung's father became a Christian himself. After some time, he was arrested, deported to North Korea, and later died in prison. Jung himself escaped from North Korea but was recaptured and subjected to harsh imprisonment.

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

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



Jung Jik was forcibly repatriated to North Korea, twice

CENTRAL ASIA: Growing authoritarianism

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

2024 saw a wave of arrests and interrogations of Christians. Under the guise of national security, authorities have been known to impose restrictions on religious gatherings, the production and distribution of religious literature, evangelistic work and religious activity among children and young people.

COUNTRY REPORTS

Kyrgyzstan re-entered the top 50 on the World Watch List this year, for the first time since 2013. Ranked 61st a year ago, the Central Asian country has risen to rank 47th on the 2025 World Watch List. This was, by far, the biggest move on the List, and the primary reason was a sharp uptick in violence against the church.

For example, the Baptist Union reported that on multiple occasions during the year, local residents hurled stones at the office of a Christian organisation in Karakul in an attempt to drive it off its property. In March, representatives of the State Commission on Religious Affairs, some armed, raided St Nicholas Catholic Church in Talas, forced departing worshippers back inside, and held the congregation there until two nuns had signed a statement admitting to 'illegal missionary activities' and 'spreading their ideology'.

Such assaults helped to drive up Kyrgyzstan's historically low violence score. This happened against a backdrop of a presidency that has been concentrating power for several years. Amnesty International said in April 2024 that the authorities had 'intensified their campaign

to stifle all forms of public criticism and peaceful dissent'.³ New laws enacted in March 2024 against alleged "foreign representatives" have triggered state action against churches. Overly broad definitions of political activity are also being used to curb the right to freedom of association.

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

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

Meanwhile, in **Tajikistan**, pressure on Christians rose in all spheres of life, and as in other cases, violence also increased. The government continues to impose many restrictions on church activities. Elsewhere in the region, **Turkmenistan** and **Uzbekistan** retain their places in the top 50 due to ongoing persecution, discrimination and hostility faced by Christians.

³ [Amnesty International, 2024, Kyrgyzstan 2023](#)



Gulmera*, a Christian convert from Islam reading her Bible, Central Asia



Bazaar in Isfahan, Iran

IRAN: unrecognised citizens

Iran remains at number 9 on the 2025 World Watch List. The Iranian government sees Persian-speaking Iranian Christians as an attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the Islamic regime. They are often accused of being part of a 'Zionist cult', i.e. having ties with the state of Israel, which is particularly worrying given the increasing tensions between the two nations.⁴ Meanwhile, historical communities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are recognised by the state but are treated as second-class citizens.

In February 2024, a coalition of organisations, including Open Doors, CSW, Article 18 and Middle East Concern, published a report entitled *Faceless Victims*.⁵ The report highlights the difficulty of getting information out of Iran, as many who are incarcerated because of their faith are simply not recorded. There is also a legitimate fear that publicising their cases could worsen their situation. Those distributing Bibles in the country have been explicitly targeted, with 'over one-third of arrests targeting individuals in possession of multiple copies'. The report also highlights how those who leave prison may continue to be targeted by the authorities. In addition, other research has set out how Christians seeking to leave Iran have faced challenges in neighbouring countries.⁶

Since protests erupted following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022,⁷ state surveillance has increased, and the authorities are attempting to exert a firmer grip on the daily lives of all citizens. In October 2023, the death of Armita Geravand⁸ highlighted how AI surveillance can have dire consequences. Following protests against the Iranian regime, the Hijab and Chastity Bill was passed, which committed to the use of AI-assisted tools such as facial recognition to

enforce the country's strict morality codes. Under this new legislation, systems have been created with personal identification databases being linked to facial recognition cameras.⁹ Sadly, the 2024 election of a new President of Iran has not been accompanied by any signs of improvement.

In November 2024, the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution, which expressed 'serious concern about ongoing severe limitations and increasing restrictions on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief' in Iran, and which named specific examples of these restrictions.¹⁰

In January 2025, Iran will undergo its Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations Human Rights Council. It is vital that the rights of religious minorities in Iran are considered alongside the rights of other groups.

⁴ In August 2024, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) published a briefing highlighting the Iranian government's use of disinformation against religious minorities

⁵ [Article 18, 2024, Faceless Victims: Rights Violations Against Christians in Iran](#)

⁶ [To learn more about these cases, see the following reports: Article 18, 2024, The Plight of Iranian Christians Seeking International Protection in Georgi; and Article 18, 2023, The Plight of Iranian Christians Claiming International Protection in Türkiye](#)

⁷ [BBC, 2024, Mahsa Amini: Iran responsible for 'physical violence' leading to death, UN says](#)

⁸ [BBC, 2023, Armita Geravand: Iranian girl who collapsed on Tehran metro dies](#)

⁹ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023, The AI Assault on Women: What Iran's Tech Enabled Morality Laws Indicate for Women's Rights Movements](#)

¹⁰ [United Nations, 2024, Promotion and protection of human rights: human rights situations and reports of special rapporteurs and representatives: Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran , page 25](#)

UNREGISTERED: freedom of assembly and freedom of religion or belief

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

One example, noted by Open Doors for some years, is the connection between FoRB and the right to peaceful assembly. The right to

peaceful assembly (Article 21 ICCPR) protects peaceful assemblies wherever they take place: outdoors, indoors and online, in public and private spaces, or a combination of the above.

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



A closure notice from authorities on a church in Algeria

Several countries have witnessed an escalation of violence and hostilities against Christians as they gather for worship or other activities. In the 2025 World Watch List reporting period (1 October 2023 to 30 September 2024), 7,679 churches or public Christian properties were attacked.

The destruction of church buildings, disruption of church services by vigilante groups, and arrests and detention of church leaders are direct and visible violations. However, many governments have also implemented discriminatory laws and regulations that are less visible but have effectively shut down churches or limit who can lawfully gather, restricting the size of religious gatherings.

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

ALGERIA

In Algeria, the number of Christians awaiting trial and sentencing is at an all-time high. Others keep a low profile to avoid prosecution under laws that regulate non-Muslim religious practice. The government attempted various forms of financial and organisational pressure to weaken churches, with a particular focus on online Christian activities. In addition, the authorities continue to systematically close Protestant churches. To date, 43 evangelical churches have been shut down, leaving only one open with reduced activity in Algiers.

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

The Église Protestante d'Algérie (EPA), the umbrella organisation of Protestant churches in Algeria, has faced a high level of legal and government pressure after legislation governing religious associations came into force in 2012. This required re-registration of existing associations. The EPA obtained official

recognition as a religious association in 1974. However, the provisions introduced in the 2012 law required that national associations have a presence and a minimum of 25 founding members from at least 12 different provinces.

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

Members of the EPA National Council have been working tirelessly for several months to meet the requirements of the Algerian Ministry of the Interior. The president of the EPA, Pastor Salah Chalah, and the team working with him are engaged in a long-term effort requiring a great deal of patience, wisdom and perseverance to comply with the 2012 law on associations. Without this compliance, no Protestant place of worship will be opened.

Many Christian leaders in Algeria have also been prosecuted for conducting worship. Initial convictions typically result in probation and fines, but repeated 'offences' may lead to imprisonment.

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

UNDESIRABLES: authoritarianism in Latin America

NICARAGUA

Cases of discrimination and state hostility against Christians continued in Nicaragua during the 2025 World Watch List reporting period, with a rising number of public Christian properties closed and more Christians expelled from the country. This was driven by growing hostility against Christians refusing to show loyalty to the regime, who are subsequently labelled ‘terrorists’ or ‘enemies’



A discipleship course for local pastors, Nicaragua

of the state. Repressive methods have become so systematic that they disrupt normal church activities and increasingly impose a culture of fear and self-censorship among Christians as they try to avoid becoming targets of the government.

The Nicaraguan government uses bureaucracy to control or shut down religious organisations. According to the *Nicaragua World Report 2024* by Human Rights Watch,¹¹ the government closed more than 3,500 non-governmental organisations in 2023 under the ‘foreign agents’ law, which targets organisations receiving foreign funding and engaging in political activities. This law has significantly impacted pastors and congregations who protested against government injustices in 2018. In response to these restrictions, many churches have started meeting in homes or other discreet locations to protect their members from surveillance and persecution.

CASE STUDY: ADRIANA

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

The family's trials did not end with the protests. Adriana's husband refused to participate in the 2021 voting process, believing the elections lacked transparency and fairness. His decision led to the denial of their church's legal status, constant surveillance by police and government agents, and difficulties in obtaining essential documents for their children's education.

Adriana's story offers a glimpse into the broader challenges faced by Christians in Nicaragua. Christian pastors who dissent from the government often keep a low profile to avoid reprisals. They live in constant fear of surveillance.

¹¹ HRW, 2024, [Nicaragua Events of 2023](#)

CUBA

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

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

CASE STUDY: PASTOR MIGUEL

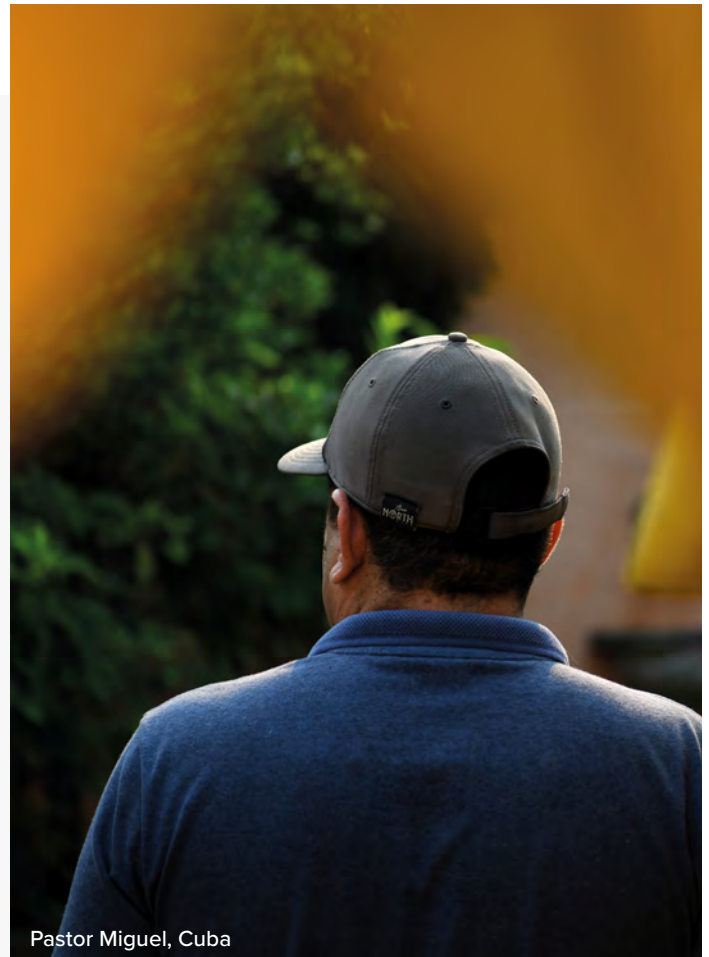
As he sits down to tell his story, Pastor Miguel* seems anxious. "Talking about the situation in my country always makes me nervous," he explains. "When you are so used to persecution, the inability to speak freely – and constantly being on alert – affects your mind and personality." Miguel fled Cuba a few years ago with his wife and children.

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

This strategy continues today. A study by the Observatory of Social Rights revealed that 68% of respondents know a believer who has been harassed, repressed, threatened or hindered due to their faith.

The situation is even more precarious for pastors, and Miguel has faced increasing government surveillance and threats. "I was interrogated more than 50 times by state security, but this is normal for Christian leaders in Cuba."

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



Pastor Miguel, Cuba

UNDER SURVEILLANCE: digital persecution and AI

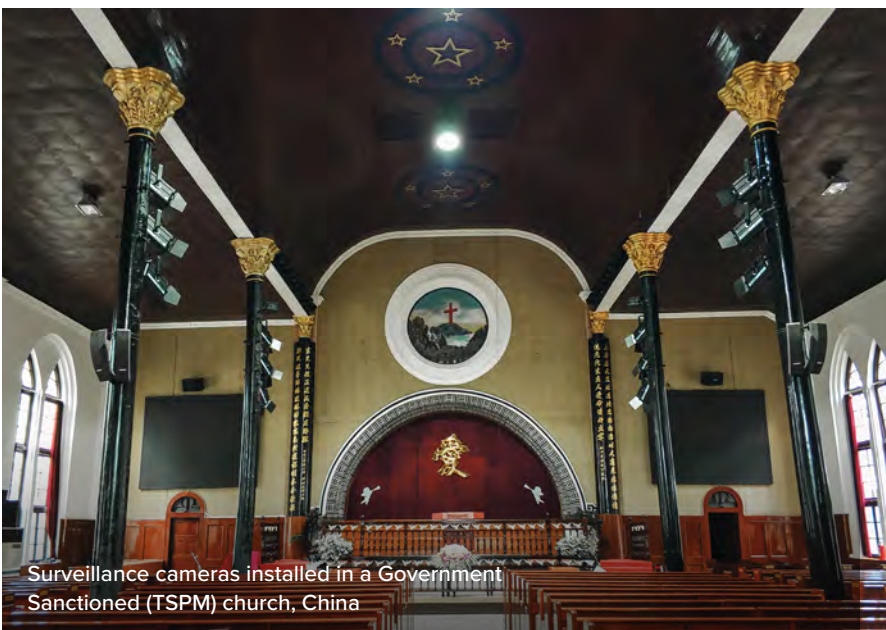
In the rapidly evolving technological landscape, artificial intelligence (AI) is emerging as a mechanism of control for authoritarian states. In recent years, AI-powered systems have been exacerbating the persecution of Christian communities. Governments in countries such as China and Iran leverage AI-powered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

There is a growing recognition of the risks posed to the rights of Christians and other groups by new technology. At the Freedom of Religion or Belief conference in Berlin in October 2024, Professor Stephen Schneck, chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), highlighted that AI was now being used as a tool to ‘persecute people for their faith’. Prof Schneck stated that this trend is ‘truly Orwellian’ and fears it is ‘the shape of the world to come’.¹²

In China, facial recognition allows the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to monitor those who attend religious ceremonies, the integrated AI social scoring system allows them to track religious groups at a level that was not possible before. It has become compulsory for facial recognition cameras to be installed in state-approved churches. Churches that resist have been raided or shut down.¹³ As Open Doors reported previously, China has been exporting these systems of control to other countries, including Iran, where systems are used to crack down on women, protesters and religious minorities.

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

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



¹² [Christian Post, 2024, China, Iran using AI to 'track and repress' Christians like never before, expert warns: 'Truly Orwellian'](#)

¹³ [USCIRF, 2019, Religious Freedom in China's High-Tech Surveillance State](#)

SURVEILLANCE

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

China is the world's most advanced surveillance state. Unregistered churches are now considered illegal as authorities more regularly enforce regulations and tighten policies. Christians in other autocratic states are having to be more alert to being watched, both online and in person. In China and elsewhere, World Watch List researchers detect a growing caution among Christians about being open with their faith.

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



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

CHURCH ON THE RUN: displacement and religious affiliation

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

DISPLACEMENT AND FAITH BACKGROUND

Not all displaced Christians are displaced because of their faith, though that is certainly true for some. Displaced Christians – alongside others – may also suffer violations of their rights for reasons other than their faith. Whatever the cause of their displacement, Christian refugees and IDPs are at greater risk and may encounter discrimination or hostility at any stage of their displacement journey – even in IDP or refugee camps.

Displacement breaks individuals and families away from social and community networks, and a loss of community can be a threat to the resilience of Christians and their sense of identity. Rights violations do not end at borders. The global picture of rights violations against Christians can only be partial if only the static church is considered.

LEGAL PROTECTIONS AND GAPS

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

- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) protects the rights of minorities to enjoy their culture, religion and language without discrimination, including their right to live in their homeland.
- Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement offer a set of guidelines to protect and assist displaced persons, though these principles lack binding enforcement mechanisms.
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) calls for the elimination of discrimination, including that based on race, ethnicity or religion, and advocates for equal access to land ownership and other resources.

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



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

CASE STUDY: PASTOR BARNABAS

As Pastor Barnabas walks through the camp where he lives, he points out the makeshift tents in every direction. He is the pastor for those who live in these tents, in an IDP camp in Benue State, northern Nigeria.

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

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

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



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

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: a displacement crisis

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

Open Doors research, including most recently the report *No Road Home*,¹⁴ has found that displaced Christians can face discrimination in accessing humanitarian aid. In Nigeria's Borno State, for instance, Christian IDPs reported systemic exclusion from government-run aid programmes. Living conditions in camps and host communities are often poor too. Overcrowding, inadequate sanitation and limited access to clean water and healthcare pose severe public health risks.

BURKINA FASO (20)

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

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

MALI (14)

Mali's 400,000 IDPs have mostly fled violence in the north and centre

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

NIGER (28)

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

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

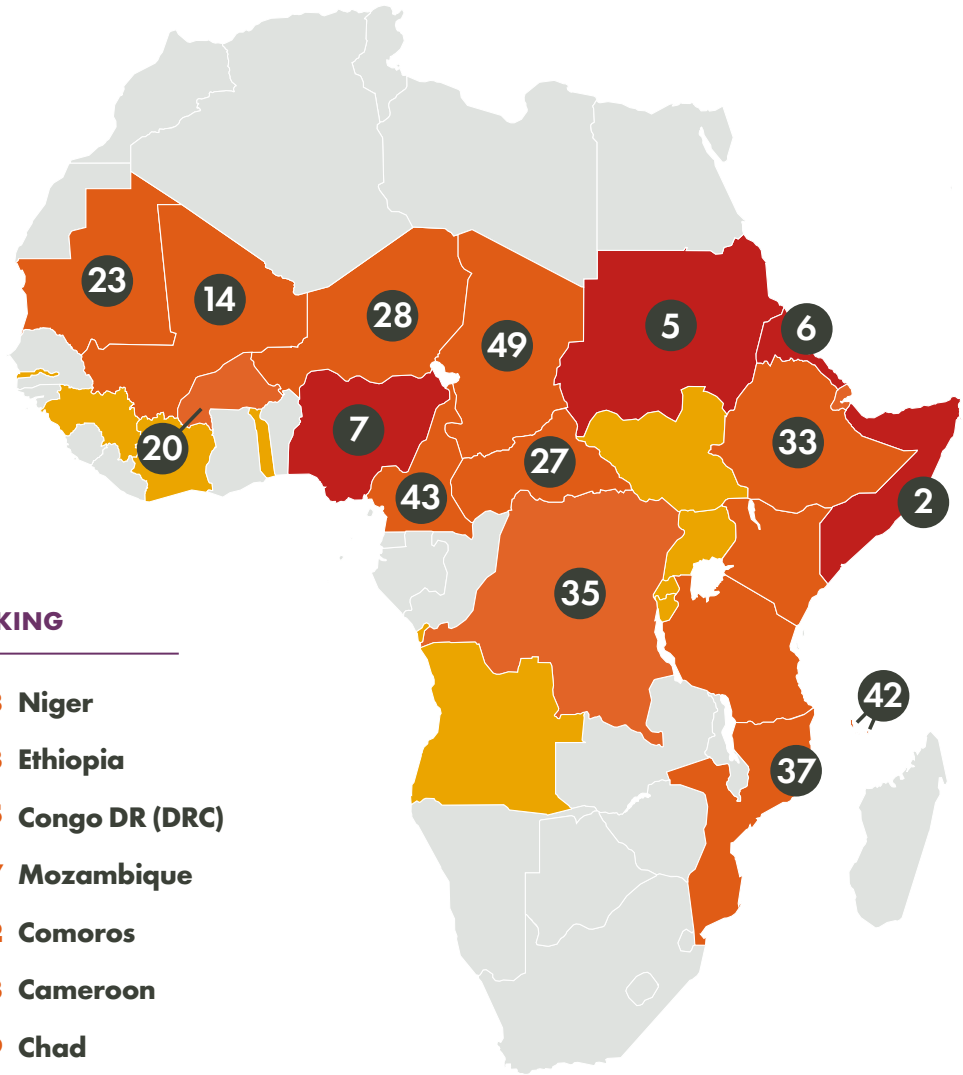


A family stand with the few belongings they were able to carry when they fled, Niger

¹⁴ [Open Doors, 2024, No Road Home: Christian IDPs displaced by extremist violence in Nigeria](#)

PERSECUTION LEVELS

- HIGH
- VERY HIGH
- EXTREME



WORLD WATCH LIST RANKING

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

NIGERIA (7)

The violence in Nigeria is multi-dimensional, driven by Boko Haram and ISWAP in the north east, clashes between herders and farmers in the Middle Belt, and banditry in the north west.

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



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



Alia, holding her sleeping child. Sudan

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

SUDAN (5)

Sudan's World Watch List total score increased three points during the 2025 reporting period. The increase was driven by the intensification of the violent clashes that broke out in the

spring of 2023 between Sudan's army and an alliance of militias. Research for the 2025 World Watch List registered increases in the number of Christians killed and sexually assaulted, as well as the number of Christian homes and businesses attacked. In a country of 49 million people, the number of internally displaced people by mid-2024 had surpassed 7.7 million – the largest displacement crisis in the world.

Compounding the pressure on Christians is a racial component: those of indigenous African descent, as opposed to Arab ethnicity, are targets not only because of their faith but also due to their ethnic identity. Christians of all backgrounds are trapped in the chaos, unable to flee. Churches are shelled, looted and occupied by the warring parties.

YEMEN: vulnerability of converts

Years of conflict have resulted in over 4.5 million Yemenis (14% of the population) becoming internally displaced and 21.6 million people being left in need of humanitarian assistance. Yemen's Christians are often denied access to aid, leaving an already vulnerable minority without essential resources.

The Yemeni church is composed largely of converts from Islam who face extreme human rights violations, compounded by the country's ongoing civil war and humanitarian crisis. Christians are subject to threats, detention, torture and death. Attacks may come from family members, tribal leaders, government authorities, Houthi rebels, radical Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda and Daesh, and tribal norms that harshly punish those leaving Islam.

THE IMPACT OF CIVIL WAR AND HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Despite some improvements this year, Yemen is still ranked sixth in the Fund for Peace Fragile States Index 2024¹⁵ and third in the World Watch List. The situation for displaced Christians remains very difficult.

The humanitarian crisis has led to widespread hunger, malnutrition and a lack of healthcare. Christians in Yemen, however, face an additional layer of vulnerability and struggle to access international aid. Local Muslim organisations contracted for humanitarian aid distribution have been reported as giving preferential treatment to Muslim beneficiaries. This is particularly true for women from religious minorities in displacement settings who are excluded from receiving aid.

CHRISTIAN CONVERTS: SOCIAL EXCLUSION

While the constitution guarantees freedom of thought and expression, it does not explicitly protect Freedom of religion or belief. Islam is enshrined as the state religion, and Sharia (Islamic law) serves as the source of all legislation. Article 259 of

the Yemeni Criminal Code criminalises apostasy, with punishment that can include the death penalty. Public expression of Christian beliefs, possession of Christian literature or even displaying Christian symbols can result in imprisonment.

Both male and female converts risk severe consequences, including divorce, the loss of custody of their children, and house arrest. For women, the situation is particularly dire, with reports of female Christian converts being imprisoned in their homes and treated as hostages.

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

ATTACKS ON CHRISTIAN GATHERINGS AND RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

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



A woman and child, Yemen

¹⁵ [World Population Review, 2024, Fragile States Index 2024](#)

TWO STORIES OF RESILIENCE

LI*: CHINA

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

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

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

MOHAMMAD*: AFGHANISTAN

Mohammad was angry when he discovered that his brother had become a Christian. He had heard that Christians were idolaters and sought to wreck his society. However, when he finally agreed to

meet some of his brother's friends, he was startled by the love that they had for one another.

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

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

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

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



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

RECOMMENDATIONS

We urge international institutions and governments to act on the findings of this research and to:

1. Promote and protect FoRB as a **leading priority** in foreign policy and diplomatic engagement both **bilaterally** and **multilaterally**, including through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the UN Human Rights Council.
2. Use the opportunities presented by **trade negotiations to promote human rights and FoRB** around the world, and to demonstrate commitment to it by establishing country-specific trade strategies which set out explicitly how trade deals will streamline human rights for people of all faiths and none.
3. Advocate for the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the **Democratic People's Republic of Korea** to be allowed in the country for an official visit and investigation of the human rights situation in North Korea.
4. Work with **humanitarian actors** and trusted partners to promote **religious literacy** among staff to prevent discriminatory treatment in aid distribution (in particularly in the **Sahel region** and **Yemen**) and ensure equal treatment regardless of age, gender, religion or belief.
5. Work on creation of **robust policies for IDPs** to ensure voluntary returns in safety and with dignity. This includes (i) safety and security prior to, during and after return; (ii) recovery and restoration of land, houses and other property; (iii) provision of humanitarian assistance, basic services, and sustainable livelihood opportunities.
6. Establish an international **commission of inquiry** under the auspices of the United Nations to investigate the nature and scale of violence in **Nigeria**, with particular sensitivity to the identity dimensions of such violence;
7. Urge the **Algerian** government to withdraw all warnings, closure orders and court cases against churches and other places of worship; ensure the immediate re-opening of all closed churches; and grant permission to all EPA-affiliated churches to continue to use rented premises as places of worship;
8. Acknowledge human rights concerns around **emerging technology**, taking the lead on developing international standards and ethical frameworks around the export and use of technology and AI around the world.

OPEN DOORS ADVOCACY

Open Doors is a global NGO, with national offices across 25 countries, operating in more than 70 countries for over 65 years with a call to 'strengthen what remains' for Christian communities facing violations to their rights on account of faith. Open Doors' vision for advocacy work is protection of individuals and promotion of Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for all as defined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This covers both private belief and public practice.

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

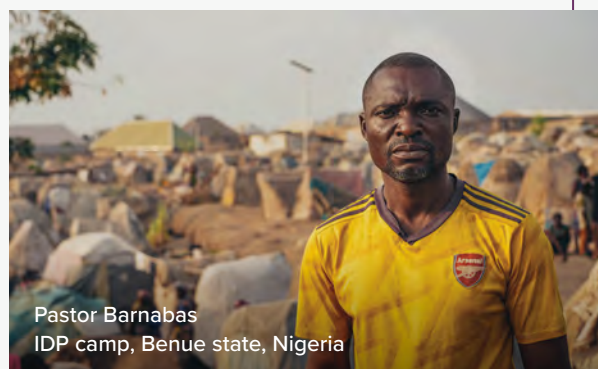
- **Internationally:** at the United Nations and European Union, as well as through engagement with other NGOs and international institutions.
- **Nationally:** in legislatures worldwide, including EU member states.
- **Locally:** offering legal support, human rights and community engagement training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

Open Doors has continued to highlight the plight of persecuted Christians to politicians, diplomats members of executive cabinets. We rely on our partners on the ground to give us the latest up-to-date information to ensure that we can speak up for the persecuted in the public sphere. The World Watch List allows us to discern global trends, highlight new and emerging areas of concern, and identify where our work has made the most difference. World Watch List data remains a trusted and credible source of information about the persecution of Christians globally, and is frequently referred to in the media, as well as in parliamentary reports and debates.

If you are a parliamentarian, civil servant, CSO worker or journalist and would like to receive Open Doors briefing materials or further information, please contact the Open Doors Advocacy team at advocacy@od.org.

ARISE AFRICA

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



Arise Africa aims to raise awareness, financial support, advocacy and prayer for Christians facing violent persecution in Sub-Saharan Africa. As part of the campaign, we have launched the *Arise Africa* petition.¹⁶

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

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

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

¹⁶ [Open Doors UK & Ireland, 2024, Arise Africa Campaign](#)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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

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

The data collected covers freedom of religion for Christians in their private, family, community and national spheres of life, along with the freedom of Christians to gather together as the church. These five areas comprise what is referred to

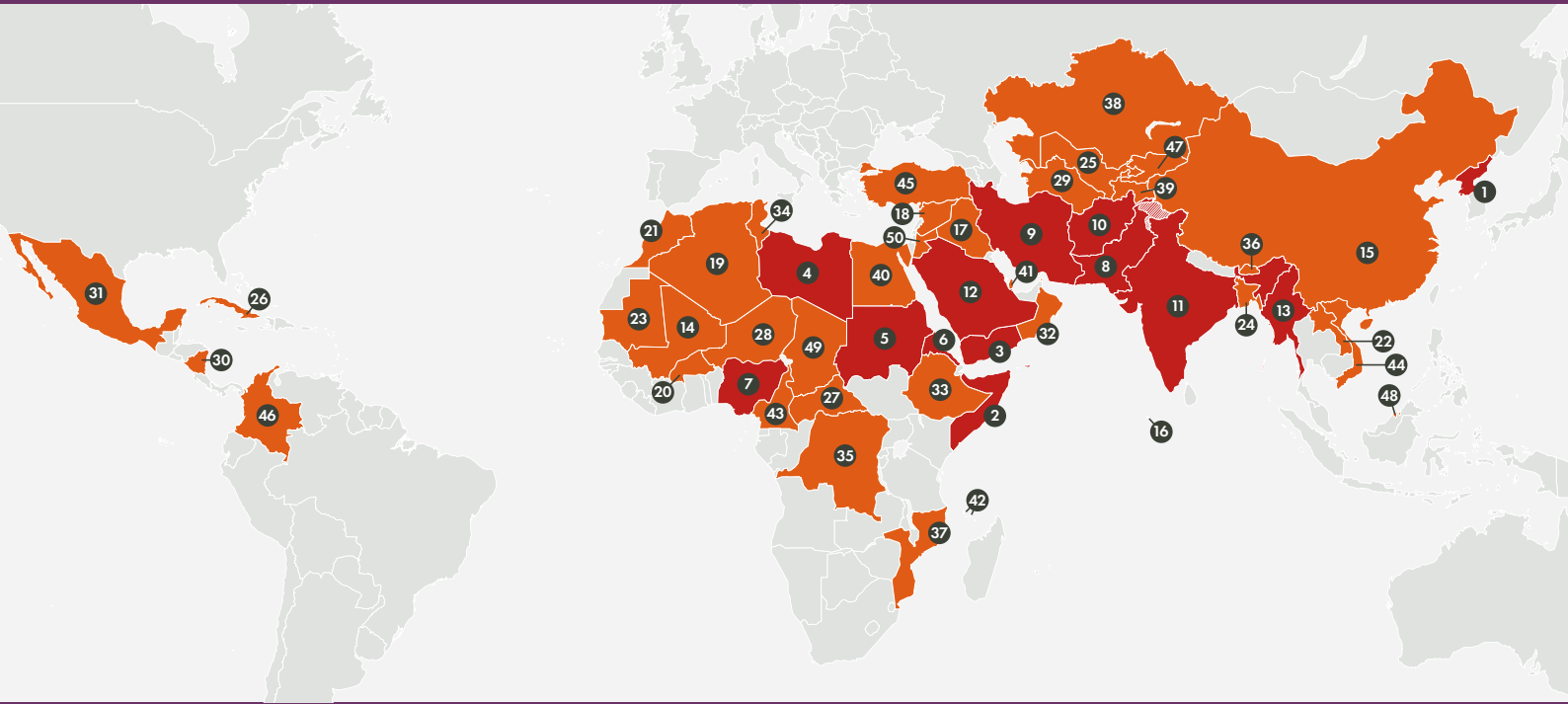
as the ‘squeeze’ (i.e. non-violent) component of persecution. Violence against Christians, which is referred to as the ‘smash’ element of persecution, is measured separately. While violence against Christians remains the most ‘eye-catching’ form of persecution, the ‘squeeze’ is the most defining form of persecution for Christians in many World Watch List countries. For each country surveyed, scores for the six categories are designated and then aggregated to determine a score out of a possible hundred. These scores determine a country’s ranking on the World Watch List.

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

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

[Click here](#) for more detailed information on the World Watch List methodology.

THE 2025 OPEN DOORS WORLD WATCH LIST TOP 50



EXTREME LEVELS OF PERSECUTION

VERY HIGH LEVELS OF PERSECUTION

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



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