

World Watch Research

Brunei:

Background Information

September 2024



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Contents

Copyright and sources	1
Map of country	2
Recent history	2
Political and legal landscape	3
Religious landscape.....	4
Economic landscape.....	5
Social and cultural landscape.....	6
Technological landscape	8
Security situation	8
Christian origins	9
Church spectrum today.....	9
Further useful reports.....	10
External Links	10

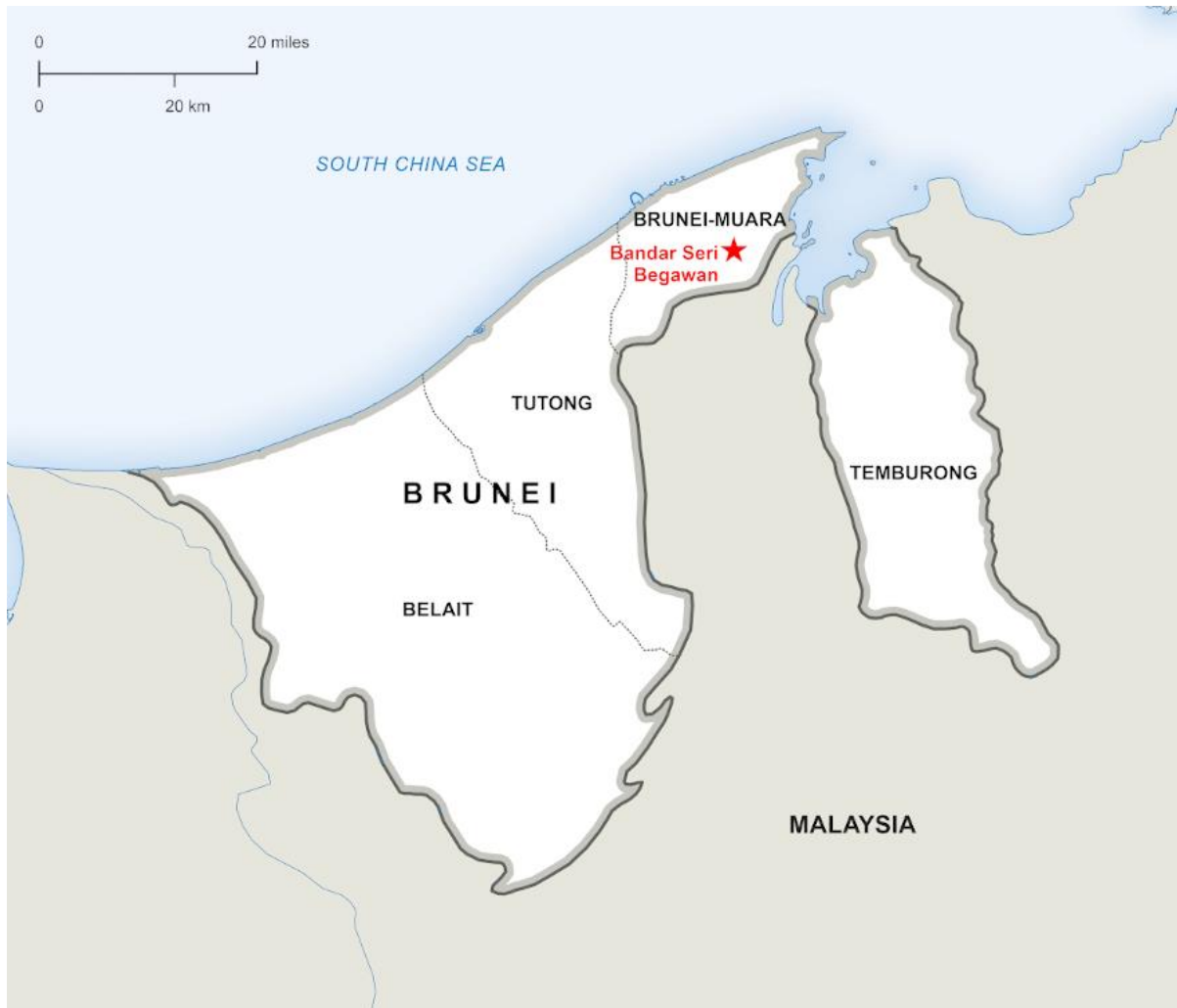
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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Brunei: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
456,000	55,600	12.2

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

Brunei was a British protectorate from 1888 to 1984 and is now the only politically independent sultanate in the world. The ruling sultan is the 29th, the royal line reaching back as far as 1363. On 1 January 1984, the day of independence, the ruling sultan officially proclaimed Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) as Brunei's national philosophy. MIB is a blend of Malay and Islamic cultural values guarded by the monarchy. This system opposes the concept of secularism. May 2014 saw the introduction of Sharia Penal Code (SPC); however, implementation was not announced until 2018 with the [introduction](#) of its Criminal Procedures Code (CPC) (Borneo Bulletin, 31 March 2019). While Brunei normally does not come into the international spotlight, the fact that it assumed the annually rotating ASEAN presidency in 2021 pushed it into the limelight, as did the escalating crisis in Myanmar at the same time (see below: *Political and legal landscape*). After this brief period, the country enjoyed its relative anonymity again.

Political and legal landscape

The sultan rules as [absolute monarch](#), being chief of state, but also concurrently prime minister, finance minister, minister of the interior as well as of defense and head of religion (East Asia Forum, 23 October 2019). Hence, all power is concentrated in his hands. The general public deeply respects the sultan and there is no demand for more political participation.

In a major [cabinet reshuffle](#) in June 2022, the sultan replaced eight ministers. While his own ministerial duties remained unchanged, the change is noteworthy because for the first time since 1958 a woman has been made full member of the cabinet, in this case as the Minister of Education (The Scoop, 7 June 2022). There have been deputy and vice positions taken by women before, but not a position as minister.

In October 2023, the sultan introduced obligatory Islamic religious studies for all schools and incorporated it into students' general studies (see *Brief description of the persecution situation*). But more importantly, in October 2013, he announced the successive introduction of Sharia in criminal law, the so-called “Hudud” law. In 2014, Brunei enacted the new Sharia Penal Code (SPC), which is to apply also to non-Muslims, and which includes offences carrying the death penalty. The 2nd phase was supposed to be implemented in 2015 but was delayed. In March 2018, the implementation of the second phase was finally announced.

In a surprising move only made public on 25 March 2019, Brunei's Minister of Religion declared 3 April 2019 as the commencement date for the [implementation of Sharia Penal Code](#). The Government Gazette was dated 29 December 2018, but the announcement was only made public ten days before implementation. After a five year period of leaving this law pending, the sudden publication of an imminent date for implementation seemed to have been an attempt by the sultan and his government to avoid as much international outcry and pressure as possible. Judging by the public outcry afterwards, these efforts did not succeed. International media was quick to highlight the immediate [serious consequences](#) for the LGBTQIA+ community in the country, but it would have consequences for converts from Islam to Christianity as well (Reuters, 25 March 2019). In a rare move, the sultan did react publicly to criticism by announcing that his country did not intend to [implement the death penalty](#) as foreseen in Brunei's SPC (Reuters, 5 May 2019). So far, no cases against religious minorities (or LGBTQIA+ groups) have been reported.

Brunei took over the rotating presidency of the ASEAN group of southeast Asian states for 2021. When the crisis in Myanmar emerged with the military coup on 1 February 2021, Brunei thus found itself in an unwanted spotlight it is not used to. In a highly exceptional move, ASEAN organized an emergency meeting in Jakarta in April and came up with a five-point-plan (for more detail, see WWR's [WWL 2024 Full Country Dossier on Myanmar](#)). Then in June 2021, Bruneian officials representing ASEAN went on what one observer called a [‘disastrous mission’](#) (Jakarta Post, 10 June 2021). The ASEAN envoys publicly used the titles General Min Aung Hlaing had given himself, thus apparently endorsing his leadership and the coup. A press release along these lines was hastily taken off the ASEAN website. While this might be viewed as just a 'diplomatic accident', it is an illustration of how politics is understood in Brunei and seems to reveal a thinking pattern which can be identified with the 'Dictatorial paranoia' to be found in Brunei.

Gender perspective

The new [Penal Code](#) was also greeted by concerns about gender equality; while the sentence applies to both women and men, women are reportedly disproportionately affected by punishment for crimes involving sexual relations and are thereby more vulnerable to discriminatory investigations ([CEDAW, 2014](#)). On a broader level, Brunei’s political and legal landscape lacks gender equality in relation to marriage, divorce, child guardianship and inheritance laws. Whilst Brunei ratified the CEDAW convention, it made a general reservation to any aspects of the Convention which might be deemed contrary to the beliefs and principles of Islam ([CEDAW, 2014](#)). Notable issues of concern include child marriage and domestic violence. Although official data on child marriage is lacking, it is reportedly rare and an interdicted social practice ([USDS Human Rights Report, 2022, p.18-19](#)). Insufficient laws addressing domestic violence make it difficult for victims to escape abusive marriages.

Religious landscape

Brunei: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	55,600	12.2
Muslim	267,000	58.6
Hindu	4,200	0.9
Buddhist	43,400	9.5
Ethnic religionist	44,900	9.8
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	250	0.1
Atheist	140	0.0
Agnostic	5,700	1.3
Other	34,310	7.5
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

As per WCD 2024 estimates, Muslims (mostly Sunni) make up 58.6% of the population. The ruling sultan is head of religion: What he wants, becomes law - and if he decides that Islam will continue on a more conservative path, everyone (including the churches) have to accept that. Christians are free to worship, but they have been warned not to do so "excessively and openly". The Sharia Penal Code includes several provisions which limit the freedom of religion, not just for converts, but for the Christian minority as well. Time will tell how the provisions are implemented.

The US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Brunei](#)) explains the ethno-religious affiliations as follows:

- "There is significant variation in religious identification among ethnic groups. According to 2022 official statistics (the most recent), ethnic Malay citizens comprise 73.5 percent of the population, and most are defined by law as Muslims from birth. The ethnic Chinese population, which is approximately 9.5 percent of the population and includes both citizens and stateless permanent residents, is 65 percent Buddhist and 20 percent Christian, and 15 percent other religions or nonreligious. Indigenous tribes, such as the Dusun, Bisaya, Murut, and Iban, make up approximately 4 percent of the population and are estimated to be 50 percent Muslim, 15 percent Christian, and the remainder followers of other religions, including adherents of traditional spiritual practices. The remaining 13 percent of the population includes foreign-born workers, primarily from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and other South Asian countries. According to official statistics, approximately half of these temporary and permanent residents are Muslim, more than one-quarter are Christian, and 15 percent are Buddhist."

Economic landscape

According to [UNDP Human Development Report](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Gross National Income (2017 USD PPP):** 59.246
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** No data available
- **Remittances:** No data available (Brunei is a labor migrants receiving, not sending, country)

According to [World Bank Brunei data](#) (accessed 23 August 2024):

- Brunei is classified as being a high income economy.
- **GDP per capita (PPP constant 2017 international USD):** 58.670
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** -2.4% (2022)
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP):** No data available

The COVID-19 crisis left a tangible impact on Brunei's life and economy, but it weathered the storm [better than many other](#) countries (The Diplomat, 22 June 2020). The growth rate continues to contract, although a stronger demand for oil saved Brunei from suffering such a severe effect on the GDP as experienced by almost all of its Asian peers. The strong dependency on the oil industry could be seen in the numbers, with the rise in petrochemical production reaching [almost 600%](#) in the first half of 2020 (The Scoop, 3 January 2021). At the same time, the dependency on producing oil also means that Brunei is missing out on the post-pandemic recovery which most of its Southeast Asian peers are enjoying; this can be seen in the continued contraction of GDP. Rising oil prices as a consequence of the current Russia/Ukraine and Israel/Gaza conflicts may save Brunei from suffering a harsher decline one more time. However, the fact that the decommissioning of ageing oil wells is predicted to become a lucrative business over the next years (when [around 1000 wells](#) need to be closed over a period of 30 years) shows that the dependency on oil may come to an end (The Scoop, 28 June 2021). Christians are not excluded from these general trends.

The dependency on oil is one reason why Brunei is trying to diversify its economy in order to give more of its citizens a good future perspective, especially the younger generation. Although the development plan "Vision Brunei 2035" aiming to expand various economic sectors was already published in 2007, there is little to show for it so far. The first quarter of 2022 saw a [growing oil output](#) due to a recently discovered oil field and to the high energy prizes caused by the Russian/Ukraine war (The Scoop, 2

March 2022). With an estimated [70-80% of the country's citizens](#) employed by the government or government-linked institutions (The Diplomat, 17 February 2016), there is limited hope for an internally-driven economic expansion. This is the main reason why the younger generation is increasingly looking for employment opportunities abroad.

The government of Brunei needs to make some difficult choices. The comfortable days, when the ruling sultan was able to care for all his subjects' needs, will soon be over, even though oil prices are surging at the moment. Until now, his government provides free medical services and subsidizes goods such as rice and housing. There are no school fees for state schools, and citizens of Brunei do not have to pay income tax. But since the oil and gas reserves may only last for just one more generation or less, the government needs to start thinking about alternatives. Until now, it has [not been particularly successful](#) as it seems that the world does not need an "Islamic Singapore" (or already has one in United Arab Emirates' Dubai or Qatar's Doha) (Asia Times, 26 April 2017). However, some "downstream projects", related to the oil industry, seem to be successful in the country's efforts at diversification, like a [urea production](#) facility (World Fertilizer Magazine, 1 February 2022).

Other projects, such as the the Brunei Muara port ([EIU Brunei profile](#), accessed 23 August 2024) and the expansion of the [Hengyi petrochemicals plant](#) (The Scoop, 8 March 2023) are on track, but are mostly related to the petrochemical industry as well. The extensive Hengyi plant expansion, in particular, comes with its own [challenges](#), including a growing dependency on China; it is a state-led and state-driven project allowing for little meaningful diversification of the economy (East Asia Forum, 31 August 2023). Evidence for Brunei's apparent leaning towards China can also be seen in the fact that a virtually unknown Bruneian airline placed the first [international order](#) for 30 China-made C 919 aircraft, although the company structures are opaque (Reuters, 22 September 2023). Calls for [diversification](#) and investments in the global decarbonization drive and in renewable energies may show another path (East Asia Forum, 14 February 2024), but again, Brunei is competing with its Asian and even Middle Eastern peers in these fields.

Gender perspective

In general, women are more economically vulnerable than men due to patrilineal inheritance practices, and a lower female labor force participation rate; 55.5% of women are in the workforce as of 2022, compared to 72.3% of men ([World Bank, Gender Data Portal, 2023](#)). This economic dependence could be exploited to put pressure on female converts.

Social and cultural landscape

According to [UNDP Human Development Report](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024) and [World Factbook Brunei](#) (accessed 23 August 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Malay 67.4%, Chinese 9.6%, other 23% (2021 est.)
- **Main languages:** Malay (Bahasa Melayu) (official), English, Chinese dialects
- **Urbanization rate:** 79.1%
- **Literacy rate:** 97.6% (15 years and above)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 9.2 years
- **Health and education indicators:** Per 10,000 people, Brunei has 16.1 physicians and 29 hospital beds. The pupil teacher ratio in elementary school is 10:1

According to [World Bank Brunei data](#) (accessed 23 August 2024):

- **Population/Age distribution:** 22% of the population are below the age of 14, 6.2% are above the age of 65.
- **Education:** The primary school enrolment rate is 98%, the primary school completion rate is 100% (2020)
- **Unemployment:** 4.5%; the rate of vulnerable employment is 5% (modeled ILO estimate).
- **IDPs/Refugees:** There is no international data on migration to Brunei available, however, an estimated 24% of [people living](#) in Brunei have only residential status (2022).

According to [UNDP Human Development Report](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.823, Brunei ranks 55th on the list of 193 countries. Brunei's HDI has slightly decreased but remains at a very high level
- **Life expectancy:** 74.6 years
- **Median age:** 32
- **Gini coefficient:** data is not available
- **Gender inequality:** With a score of 0.279, Brunei ranks 68th of 166 countries in the Gender Inequality Index.
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 9.1% and 6% of the population are in vulnerable employment. The rate of unemployed youth is 30%, the rate of youth neither in school nor employment is 21% (between 15 and 24 years of age)

The population of Brunei is, to a certain extent, quite ethnically homogenous but, like neighboring Malaysia, it also has a sizeable Chinese and a smaller Indian community. Restrictions are gradually being imposed on the whole population. For instance, during Ramadan all restaurants (including non-Muslim establishments) must close. Also, all restaurants (including inside hotels) must close every Friday from 12 noon to 2pm during Friday prayers. Public Christmas celebrations are [banned](#) (UCA News, 23 December 2019).

Citizens of Brunei are used to a high level of social benefits provided by the government, meaning the sultan. It may prove difficult to remove some of these benefits, at a time when the economy is not thriving anymore. At the same time, the government is trying to reduce the unhealthy large number of citizens employed in government departments. The official overall unemployment rate is decreasing, but youth unemployment is consistently more than double that rate, explaining at least in part why many of the younger generation are planning to leave the country or have already left. This is also an incentive for Christian youth to leave, in addition to the pressure experienced by belonging to a religious minority. Due to the difficult situation and uncertain future, [mental health issues](#) are a frequent problem; according to official numbers, 1.5% of the population are in treatment for mental health disorders (The Diplomat, 29 June 2021).

The situation of migrant workers may come under closer scrutiny, if the economic situation does not improve. For example, there are 20,000 migrant workers from Bangladesh in Brunei and in a normal year, around 5,000 would be hired annually. However, from January 2020 to August 2022, a mere 950 workers were [hired](#) (The Diplomat, 19 October 2022). Meanwhile, numbers would appear to be normalizing again; as reported by [TBS News on 17 April 2024](#): Although only 3,473 workers were

recruited by Brunei between January 2020 and January 2024, "according to unofficial estimates, around 25,000 Bangladeshi workers are currently doing jobs in various sectors, including construction, cleaning, restaurants, and oil and gas in Brunei."

Gender perspective

Within Brunei, gender stereotypes remain deeply entrenched and men and women are expected to assume traditional gender roles, but that is rapidly changing ([Curaming and Alkaff, 2021, p. 9](#)). For instance, a recent cabinet reshuffle by Brunei's monarch saw the emergence of the first woman to assume a ministerial position since 1959 ([The Scoop, 7 June 2022](#)). The CEDAW committee observed that Brunei's socio-normative attitudes "are reflected in women's academic and professional choices, their limited participation in political and public life and their unequal position in the labor market and in marriage and family relations' and serve to 'perpetuate women's subordination within the family and society" ([CEDAW, 2014](#)). Domestic violence victims rarely report cases due to stigma, shame, economic dependence, fear of reprisals and fear of losing access to their children. On a societal level, it is considered a private matter that should be dealt with by the family or local community.

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Brunei](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 99.0% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 66.3% of the total population: 47.5% of social media users were female, while 52.5% were male.
- **Active cellular mobile phone subscriptions:** 135.9% of the total population

Brunei's Internet penetration rate is high, reflecting a modern and highly developed country. Media reporting is however limited and it is unthinkable to openly criticize the government or the sultan. Nonetheless, the younger generation in particular is very active on social media sites like Reddit, which has been one of the first places where Bruneians have started to ask questions about the deliberately low-key introduction of the Sharia Penal Code (SPC). For example: A discussion started in [July 2020](#) on Reddit about whether citizens can read religious books and have religious discussions in public. For Christians, these online forums are an opportunity to participate in debates and to cautiously and wisely share views, as long as such participation is not perceived as being openly missionary in nature. To what extent these discussions feed back into the 'real world' is an entirely different question, of course.

Security situation

There are currently no Islamic militant groups active in Brunei and - in contrast to neighboring Southeast Asian states - no Bruneian Muslims appear to have joined the Islamic State group to fight in countries like Syria and Iraq. However, Islam is becoming increasingly conservative, limiting the space for non-Muslim Bruneian citizens. Therefore, the lack of militant groups does not mean Christians are not under pressure.

Social cohesion is high and the potential for unrest is very limited. In Southeast Asia, Brunei may be one of the safest countries to live in. Christians (whether expatriates or citizens) are able to live unaffected by violence as long as they abide by the written and unwritten rules.

Christian origins

Random missionary activities by Portuguese traders in the 16th century largely failed and it was as late as 1846 that the "Borneo Church Mission" was founded and an Anglican church congregation established. The Roman Catholic Church has been present in the country for more than a century; independent Protestant churches came later, when migrant workers entered the country. Most of these churches are linked to organizations and churches in their countries of origin.

Church spectrum today

Brunei: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	19,800	35.6
Protestant	14,500	26.1
Independent	19,200	34.5
Unaffiliated	2,100	3.8
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	55,600	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	10,800	19.4
Pentecostal-Charismatic	16,900	30.4

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

Apart from the Roman Catholic and Anglican church, there are a few Protestant churches in Brunei, which also serve expatriate communities (for instance, South Koreans and Indians). Brunei also has small Methodist and Seventh Day Adventist congregations, as well as those from the Borneo Evangelical Church.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Brunei>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

External Links

- Recent history: introduction - <https://borneobulletin.com.bn/2019/03/syariah-penal-code-order-2013-to-be-enforced-on-april-3/>
- Political and legal landscape: absolute monarch - <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/10/23/the-state-of-islam-in-brunei/>
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- Economic landscape: around 1000 wells - <https://thescoop.co/2021/06/28/over-1000-ageing-oil-wells-to-close-in-next-30-years/>
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