



# WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

A portrait of a man with grey hair and a beard, wearing a light-colored button-down shirt, looking slightly to the right.

**STRIKING AT THE FOUNDATIONS**

OPEN DOORS INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY REPORT

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. More than 388 million Christians face high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith. In Open Doors' World Watch List top 50 countries alone, 315 million Christians face very high or extreme levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith.
2. Of the 4,849 Christians killed worldwide during the World Watch List 2026 reporting period because of their Christian identity, 3,490 of them were in Nigeria, an increase from 3,100 in the previous year. Militant violence in sub-Saharan Africa has led to the deaths of thousands of Christians and has displaced many more. This extreme violence is enabled by a lack of capacity by national governments to protect their own citizens, whether in the context of civil war or against armed militants.
3. Attacks on Christian leaders have been reported in many countries. In this report, we focus on cases from Latin America. Despite many Latin American countries being majority Christian, Christian leaders can be targeted, either by an authoritarian state such as Nicaragua seeking to silence dissent, or by armed groups seeking control, as in Colombia.
4. Again, a repeated theme has been the targeting of recent converts. Families, communities and local and national authorities place particular pressure on Christian converts in order to force them back into their original faith. Female converts, for example, can suffer domestic abuse or imprisonment, while local and national governments sometimes prohibit conversion. An example in our report is given from India.
5. In some contexts, Christians are targeted through attacks on their ability to meet together, as governments simply shut down local Christian gatherings. This year's World Watch List continues to report on the impact of such closures in Algeria and in other parts of North Africa, as well as China. Such actions drive Christians into isolation.
6. Several countries in which Christians suffer high or extreme levels of persecution lie within conflict zones or in areas of great strategic significance. Our regional focus of East Africa, bordering the Red Sea, is a key example. The region contains three of the countries in the top ten. This highlights the importance of understanding challenges to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) as governments and multilateral institutions alike seek to address global trouble spots.
7. In some regions of the world, the longstanding presence of the Christian church leaves it dangerously exposed. Syria is a key example as it has climbed back into the top ten due to an increase in violence. The Christian population is concentrated in big cities and other locations that have been battlegrounds for strategic control of the country. Their churches are well known and despite a much-diminished population, Christian communities are large enough to be visible and are therefore targeted.

# EXTREME VIOLENCE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Deadly violence against Christians is increasing in sub-Saharan Africa. Among the 14 sub-Saharan countries on the 2026 World Watch List top 50, five have witnessed the overthrow of their governments, two have suspended their constitutions, and five are in the grip of armed conflict. The three countries on this year's list scoring the maximum for violence are all in sub-Saharan Africa: Sudan, Nigeria and Mali.

**Nigeria (7):** Africa's most populous nation and home to the continent's largest Christian population, has ranked in the World Watch List top ten since 2021. The country is beset by a severe combination of ethno-religious hostility, Islamist militancy, weak governance and organised crime.

Of the 4,849 Christians killed worldwide during the World Watch List 2026 reporting period because of their Christian identity 3,490 of them were killed in Nigeria – an increase from 3,100 in the previous year. In a single incident in June

2025, the Christian farming community of Yelwata in Benue State came under a four-hour attack by ethnic Fulani militants. They shot or burned to death more than 200 people, mostly women and children. There was little military response.

The Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA) noted in May 2025 that Nigeria is experiencing a convergence of threats from Islamist terror groups, both existing and newly-emerging. This is combined with a resurgence of Fulani ethnic militia attacks in the country's



Many Christians live for years in makeshift shelters in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs)

Middle Belt.<sup>1</sup> To the north west, the Lakurawa group employs sophisticated weaponry to advance an Islamist agenda that is affiliated with Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM). This is an expansionist al-Qaeda insurgency. Reports also emerged in 2025 of a new group, Mahmuda, attacking rural communities in the west of the country. About 3.4 million Nigerians remain internally displaced. Entering his third year in office in mid-2025, Nigerian President Bola Tinubu has remained unsuccessful in his declared intent to take decisive action against violence in the country.



Boko Haram militants torched homes in Chibok

## BEYOND NIGERIA

The 14 sub-Saharan African countries on the 2026 World Watch List top 50 include more than 721 million people, nearly half of whom identify as Christian. One in every 8 Christians globally lives in these 14 countries. Not all of those Christians live in regions directly affected by high levels of persecution and discrimination, but none are fully insulated from the impact of these human rights violations.

Christians in sub-Saharan Africa also face the same complex problems as their fellow-citizens of other faiths: poverty, foreign influence, climate change, ethnic identity, disputes over land and food



Christian women forced to flee their homes by Islamist violence

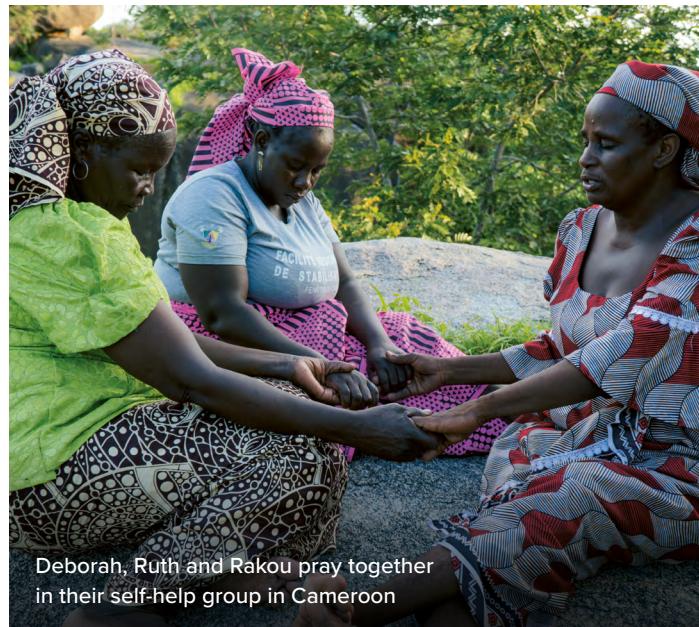
scarcity. The research behind the World Watch List reveals common threads: a weakened condition of the state, institutions that are collapsing or tightly constricted, and a collapse of the rule of law and basic governance so complete that Christians often have no meaningful legal recourse. All this creates a vacuum that draws in opportunists, mainly armed Islamist militants, who operate with impunity. The widespread challenge to state capacity hinders the ability of governments to defend the rights of their citizens, including the right to FoRB.

Extreme violence is of paramount concern in this region, as shown by our research. Weak governments have left Christians exposed in lawless zones. Armed conflicts are grinding on in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, Central African Republic and Mozambique. Chad is surrounded by conflict spilling over from neighbouring countries, especially Sudan.

**Mali (15)** has reached the maximum violence score in Open Doors' research this year, and our researchers now define the level of persecution in the country as 'extreme'. Christians outside Bamako face acute and persistent threats: intimidation, forced displacement, extortion and repeated attacks on churches and community life. Two major Islamist militant networks, JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, dominate this landscape, enforcing strict religious control and targeting Christian presence across contested regions. Earlier factions such as Ansar Dine remain relevant because of their ideological legacy and their role in shaping the broader insurgency.

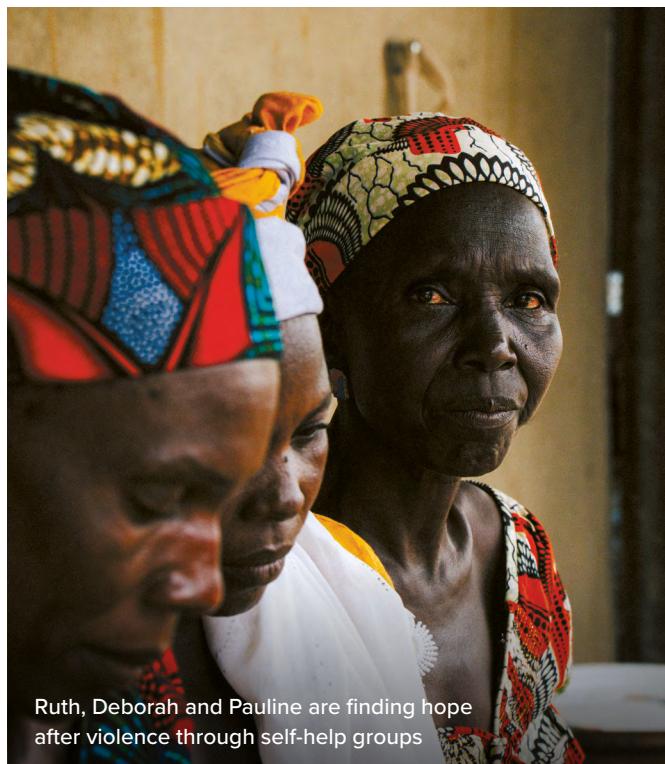
<sup>1</sup> ORFA, 2025, 'The illusion of progress: Mapping Nigeria's deteriorating security landscape', 29 May 2025. <https://orfa.africa/the-illusion-of-progress-mapping-nigerias-deteriorating-security-landscape/>

In **Niger (26)**, Christians live under a persistent mix of jihadist violence and social pressure, especially in the Tillabéri, Tahoua and Diffa regions. Here, IS-Sahel and JNIM enforce their presence through killings, abductions, village raids, extortion and roadblock interrogations. The 2023 coup and the state's weakened capacity have left large rural zones effectively controlled by armed groups or criminal networks, creating a landscape where Christians move cautiously, speak carefully and worship under the constant awareness that security forces cannot shield them. Violence also increased in **Burkina Faso (16)**, where at least 150 Christians were killed and more than 100 churches or public Christian properties were destroyed or closed due to militant Islamist activities over the reporting period.



Deborah, Ruth and Rakou pray together in their self-help group in Cameroon

**Mozambique (39)** has endured a violent insurgency in its northern Cabo Delgado province since October 2017. This is led by the Islamic State-affiliated al-Sunnah wa Jama'ah, also known as Islamic State–Mozambique, which has explicitly targeted Christian communities. In July 2025, extremists entered Intutupue village and beheaded five Christians, accusing them of refusing to submit to jihadist rule. The attackers declared the killings a warning to other Christian communities in Cabo Delgado. The militant presence is less concentrated in central Mozambique, but spillover violence and radicalisation from Cabo Delgado have begun to affect Christian communities in isolated rural areas.



Ruth, Deborah and Pauline are finding hope after violence through self-help groups

Alongside violence, Open Doors research also indicates growing pressure on Christian communities in their interaction with national government and justice systems. For example, **Cameroon (37)** saw a sharp increase in pressure on Christians from national and local authorities. This was particularly true during the election campaign, when churches were pushed to align with – or avoid contradicting – the ruling party's ideology and political agenda. This went alongside violence and pressure from non-state actors already present in the country and was echoed in other countries in the region.



A church destroyed by an Islamist militant attack

# STRIKING AT CHRISTIAN LEADERS

## Latin America

Persecution goes beyond indiscriminate violence. Targeted attacks on religious leaders can have a great impact on the morale and even the viability of Christian communities. It is a form of persecution reported across Latin American countries on the World Watch List.

### RISING AUTHORITARIANISM

**Cuba (24)** remains the highest ranking Latin American country on the World Watch List top 50. During the 2026 reporting period, persistent acts of hostility targeted Christians who, based on their faith, hold dissenting views. Church leaders and members of non-affiliated churches are particularly vulnerable. Likewise, in **Nicaragua (32)** the Ortega regime has increased its targeting of Christians who refuse to demonstrate political loyalty. This reflects an intensifying pattern of pressure aimed at silencing dissent, which encourages self-censorship among church leaders and members.

A recent report from the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) cites Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela as part of an ‘authoritarian triad’ where church leaders in particular are vulnerable to attack. It describes how, “Each country applies pressure to religious entities and leaders perceived as politically threatening or otherwise misaligned with state interests. This persecution often occurs in response to religiously motivated activity, such as public calls for the protection of human dignity or the provision of community services and support.”<sup>2</sup>

### VIOLENCE IN COLOMBIA

Attacks on religious leaders do not simply come from authoritarian regimes. In **Colombia (47)**, criminal groups continue to control large parts of the national territory and, during the reporting period, violence further intensified.

On 2 July 2025, the bodies of eight people – seven of them Christians, including religious and community leaders – were discovered in a mass grave in Guaviare, a jungle region

in Colombia. The victims had disappeared in April and had been interrogated and executed by an armed dissident group, on the false charge of collaboration with rival militants.<sup>3</sup>

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has condemned the killings: “The stigmatization and targeting of community and social leaders fuels the armed conflict and silences essential voices in the defence of human rights.”

The murders highlight the ongoing risks faced by those in local leadership roles across Colombia. Armed groups not only restrict religious activities but also persecute and threaten Christian leaders who do not align with them. Due to their integral role in their communities, many religious leaders can be considered human rights defenders. Armed groups, however, often operate under a logic of ‘criminal paranoia’, in which any community leadership can be perceived as a threat. In disputed territories, religious leaders may be mistaken for political figures or agents of the state.

Between 2023 and 2025, at least 36 Christian leaders were murdered and 18 disappeared across different parts of Colombia, according to Open Doors research. Most of these cases have gone unreported in the public sphere.



Christianity is threatened in some regions of Colombia, and Nohemí bravely visits them to share Jesus

<sup>2</sup> USCIRF, 2025, ‘Issue Update: Repression of Religious Freedom in Latin America’s Authoritarian Triad - Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela’, November 2025. <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2025-11/2025%20Issue%20Update%20Patterns%20of%20Religious%20Repression%20in%20Latin%20America.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> BBC, 2025, ‘Missing Colombian social leaders “killed by rebels”, prosecutor says’, Vanessa Buschschlüter, 2 July 2025. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c20p79p337xo>

# STRIKING AT THE VULNERABLE

## Converts in India

Recent converts are often specifically targeted, as they are vulnerable to pressure to return to their original faith. Converts are often denied legal recognition and suffer persecution and discrimination. This is in violation of their right under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to change their religion or belief.

The case study we describe on this page is a woman who is persecuted as a convert to Christianity. Open Doors research indicates that persecution affects men and women in different ways. Women converts are often particularly targeted for persecution and hostility in a domestic or familial context which can often be hidden. Tactics such as forced marriage or abuse can be used against them to pressure them to renounce their new faith. Open Doors has even received reports, from Central Asia and from the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region, of women converts being told that their conversion is a sign of mental illness, and being forcibly admitted to psychiatric hospitals, or confined at home.

### GROWING INTOLERANCE

In **India (12)**, the 2026 World Watch List reporting period saw increased pressure on individual Christians and families across the country. There has been a shift in the culture due to the Hindutva movement which believes all Indians should be Hindus. Christians are framed as betraying their country and community. This makes even the quiet practice of faith risky, and causes particular problems for Christian converts.

India's Freedom of Religion Acts or 'anti-conversion' laws have been enacted in 12 states, intended to regulate religious conversion from Hinduism. Increasingly, the law is being used to prosecute the Christian minority. In 2025, Jose and Sheeja Pappachan were fined and sentenced to five years in prison – the first Christians convicted under Uttar Pradesh's increasingly strict anti-conversion law.<sup>4</sup>

### CASE STUDY: KAVERI, INDIA

Kaveri\* is from a small village in Karnataka State in south west India. She converted to Christianity along with her children after her husband left. Kaveri began a prayer group in her home, where around 20 women gathered twice a week. However, word of the gathering spread, and some villagers became suspicious and began monitoring her activities. Eventually, a group of Hindutva extremists from the village reported her to the police, falsely accusing her of converting women.

"When the police came [to my house] and asked me to come to the station, I was shocked," Kaveri said. "Villagers stood outside, watching, but no one supported me. I tried to explain myself, but no one listened." A local pastor spoke with the police officials, made several calls, and after hours of negotiation, Kaveri returned home around one o'clock in the morning.

After the incident, the prayer gatherings stopped. Kaveri then started a small garment business, but the same extremists accused her of spreading Christian literature. Under intense opposition, she had to shut down her business and relocate with her two children. Open Doors partners supported Kaveri so she could start a new garment shop and provided sewing machines to run a sewing centre for women.



Worship in an Indian church

<sup>4</sup> UCA News, 2025, 'Indian court jails first Christians under anti-conversion law', 23 January 2025. <https://www.ucanews.com/news/indian-court-jails-first-christians-under-anti-conversion-law/10765>

# CLOSING THE CHURCH

## Algeria and North Africa

Persecution can also take the form of attacks on the freedom of a Christian church or community to meet publicly. Once again, **Algeria (20)** is a major concern as the wave of church closures that began in 2018 has continued. Reports of violence decreased in the 2026 World Watch List reporting period, mainly because all Algerian Protestant churches had already been prevented from meeting in previous years, so no new closures occurred.

### CHURCHES SEALED

On April 18, 2025, police raided a Protestant church in Béjaïa, in northern Algeria, where a group of ten Christians, including two couples, were gathered. The search was conducted without a warrant issued by the public prosecutor, which is illegal.

These Christians had their mobile phones confiscated before they were taken in police vans to the city's police station for questioning. They were detained from 1pm until almost 10pm. At the station, the ten Christians (including two women) were photographed and fingerprinted as though they were criminals. The church was sealed up (meaning the doors were barred and a notice was posted saying the church was closed) the same day, while the arrested Christians were released after signing an official statement.

This case is particularly notable because the church was one of the few not already closed by the authorities – although in 2022, its leaders had been ordered to cease all worship activities, including services, which they had complied with. “We explained to the police that our presence in the church that day was simply to check on the premises and do some cleaning.”

### SWORD OF DAMOCLES

It has been nearly 20 years since Ordinance No. 06-03, regulating the practice of non-Muslim religions, including Christianity, was issued in Algeria. But in practice, this legal framework has gone beyond regulation to become a tool of persecution, leading to the closure or sealing of nearly all Christian places of worship.

“This law is a sword of Damocles hanging over our heads,” lamented a church leader in Algeria. The ordinance, which sets conditions and rules for non-Muslim worship, severely

restricts freedom of religion for Christians. It states that ‘worship may only take place in buildings designated for this purpose, whose use is subject to prior approval by the National Commission for the Exercise of Worship’. However, not a single application for registration submitted by churches has been approved.

On top of this, leaders of the EPA (Protestant Church of Algeria) affirm that this Commission has never convened to approve any application for the registration of an EPA church. In addition, the ordinance includes measures against proselytising: ‘Anyone who incites, coerces or uses means of seduction aimed at converting a Muslim to another religion, or who distributes documents intended to shake the faith of a Muslim, shall be punished with imprisonment from two to five years and a fine.’ This ambiguous law is a constant threat to Christians.



Christians at a training session in Algeria

While Algeria is an extreme example, the pattern is not unique in the region. In the 2026 reporting period, a greater number of churches in Morocco and Tunisia were forced to stop meeting – especially sub-Saharan African migrant churches. There are also reports of increased monitoring and interrogation of church leaders in Morocco, and arrests of foreign Christians in Tunisia.

# REGIONAL FOCUS: East Africa

East Africa and the Horn of Africa contain several nations close to the top of the World Watch List. Ongoing conflicts, most notably in Sudan but also in Ethiopia, allow Islamist militants and other armed groups to target Christians. The position of these countries on the World Watch List shows the vital importance of a FoRB understanding as the international community engages with the countries in this region.

## SUDAN (4)

Sudanese Christians are caught in the crossfire, targeted by both the Sudanese Army and the opposing Rapid Support Forces (RSF). In the two years that the RSF held the capital, Khartoum, it destroyed the Gereif West Bible School, the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church, the Anglican Cathedral in Khartoum and the Evangelical Church in Omdurman, among other Christian landmarks. The Sudanese Armed Forces drove the RSF out of the capital in March 2025 – only to bulldoze a Pentecostal church complex in July. In Khartoum and beyond, hundreds of churches have been damaged, religious gatherings disrupted and faith leaders detained.

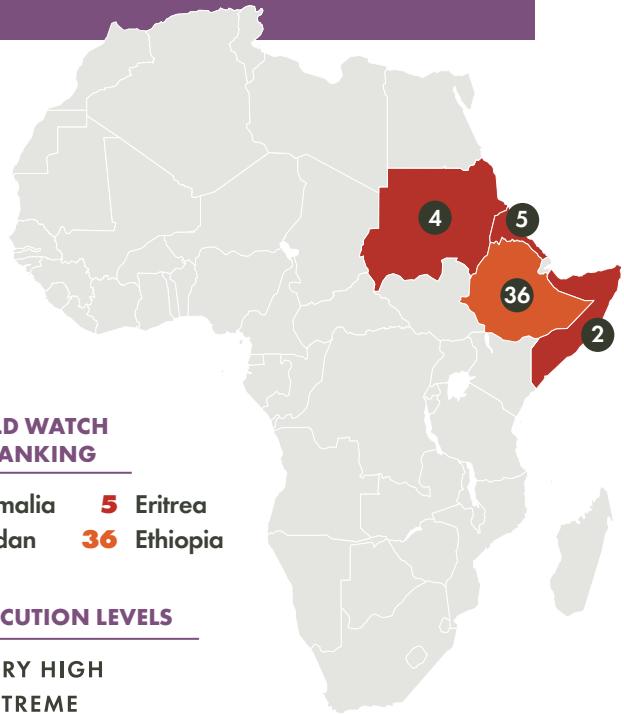
Even though other groups in Sudan are also suffering, the position of Christians is uniquely precarious. They are a small minority with no political leverage, no institutional protection and no meaningful recourse when targeted. Their vulnerability deepens in areas where armed factions impose ideological control, treat Christian identity as foreign, or use accusations of conversion as a tool of intimidation or extortion.

## SOMALIA (2)

A resurgent al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda affiliate, is exploiting the fragmentation and tensions between the central government and regional states. This power vacuum has allowed the militant group to reclaim territory, particularly in the south near the Kenyan border, where the risk to Christians is most acute. All registered churches have been closed or destroyed. Converts from Islam are seen as traitors to clan and identity. Christian survival depends on total secrecy.

## ETHIOPIA (36)

Despite a 2022 peace agreement that formally ended Ethiopia's two-year civil war, the root causes remain unresolved. The truce has failed to yield



lasting normalisation, and violence in the Amhara and Oromia regions has intensified. In 2025, armed groups burned, demolished or looted at least 25 churches in those regions. Worshippers were assaulted, religious materials destroyed and entire congregations scattered. Christians were accused of refusing to support the militants. Abductions of Christians have become a persistent and deeply unsettling pattern in the last couple of years, particularly in areas where armed groups operate with impunity.

## ERITREA (5)

In 2025, Eritrean security forces confiscated dozens of Christian-owned properties, including house churches, schools, small businesses and community centres. Congregations were accused of operating 'illegally' or being influenced by foreign agendas. Christians live under a tightly controlled security state that criminalises unregistered religious activity, detains believers indefinitely without due process, and treats independent Christian expression as a threat to national cohesion.

### CASE STUDY: AWEIS ALI, HORN OF AFRICA

“Somali Christians are among the most extremely persecuted in the world. You could be sitting in a cafeteria, enjoying your meal and somebody could come and attempt to decapitate you, to cut your head off.”

Aweis Ali grew up on the outskirts of Mogadishu, Somalia’s capital. “When I chose to become a Christian, I was cut off,” Aweis said. Somali society is a clan-based system, and being excluded has drastic consequences. “In Somali culture, you are nothing if you are on your own. If you are not connected to your clan in Somali culture, you are weak.”

For seven years, Aweis lived as a Christian by himself. This isolation and the desire to find other Christians led Aweis to risk visiting someone who he had deduced must be a Christian. He was introduced to another believer, a young man called Liban. Little by little their community grew as they looked for others.

“That’s when the persecution started,” Aweis said, and his expression darkens as he remembers this difficult time. One by one the Christians were hunted down and killed. “It was very scary, at least initially,” Aweis said. “Liban was the first to be killed. He was reporting to work, when he was shot and killed by two gunmen from the radical Islamist group al-Ittihad al-Islamia.” Shockingly, after a couple of years, only two members remained.

The unrelenting violence took a big toll on Aweis. “I’d lost almost all my friends. I couldn’t eat, and I lost so much weight. I couldn’t sleep due to the constant threats.” Whilst recuperating in another country, Aweis was given the opportunity to attend theological college, which offered him some additional support.

As part of a pastoralist culture, many Somali people live beyond Somalia’s borders, as Aweis explains. “The Somali flag has a light blue background and a five-pointed white star on it, each point representing a region of Somalia. We have Somalia, Somaliland, Djibouti, which is mainly a Somali region, Northern Frontier District, which is part of Kenya, and Ogaden, the Somali region of Ethiopia.”

Today, Aweis is a scholar, author, and Bible translator and he continues to work with Somali Christians in the Horn of Africa. He said, “The Somali church is doubly traumatised; we are part of the community that is facing the lawlessness and anarchy of the nation, but we also have the trauma caused by the persecution of our faith.”

Despite the many dangers, Aweis is resolute. “My vision for the Somali church is to become a normal, accepted part of the Somali society... a day when you will not lose your own children or spouse because of your faith. A time when the government will not put you in prison because of your faith.”

However, Aweis’ bold choice to be open with his faith, identity and ministry is not without real risk. “I receive constant threats, regular emails, WhatsApp messages, social media pages about me threatening my life,” he said.

Open Doors seeks to support Christian believers in the Horn of Africa region by providing trauma support and enabling Somali Christians to establish small businesses.



Aweis has repeatedly been threatened with murder for his faith

# THE CHURCH EXPOSED: Syria

Syria has moved up 12 places in the 2026 World Watch List due to an increase in violence against Christians in the country and wider instability. A suicide attack on a Greek Orthodox church in Damascus killed 22 Christians and wounded 63 others. Gunmen have also desecrated graves. The exodus of Christians from Syria continues.

## RESURGENT VIOLENCE

**Syria (6)** has risen to be among the top ten worst offenders for Christian persecution this year, up from 18th position last year; the most dramatic change over the 2026 World Watch List reporting period.

In December 2024, the Assad regime fell, the group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), took control of the government, and the situation for Christians changed dramatically. Despite the hopeful start, with promises of a religious freedom in Syria for people of all faiths and none, violence against Christians has reached an extremely high level.

In the 2026 World Watch List reporting period, at least 27 Syrian Christians were killed for faith-related reasons, though the true number is likely to be greater. This, along with other cases of Christians being attacked, explains the sharp rise in the country's violence score in 2026, and Syria's rise on the List.

In the same month as the HTS takeover, in the city of Hama, unidentified gunmen attacked the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, destroying church property and religious symbols, and desecrating the graves in a nearby Christian cemetery.



A threat daubed on St Cyrillos Church reads, "There will be no polytheists left in Syria by God's will. Our meeting is near, you pigs of the cross."

The resurgent violence included attacks on churches and an increase in the number of Christians killed – including in the suicide attack at Mar Elias Greek Orthodox Church. The Syrian government attributed that attack to an IS cell.

Violence is not the only source of increasing pressure on Christians. The March 2025 interim constitution centralises power in the president and establishes Islamic jurisprudence as the main source of legislation. Yet, at this still-early post-Assad stage, political power remains fragmented, and widespread disorder leaves room for sectarian and militant actors to operate.

## PRESSURE IN THE CITIES

In Syria, Christian populations have been concentrated in big cities and other locations that have been key to the battles for strategic control of the country. Pressure is greatest in Idlib and some other northern zones under the influence of IS cells and the Turkish military, which have controlled some border areas for ten years. For the few Christians who haven't already left these places, fear prevails.

Pressure is high in Syria's two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, where churches are under constant surveillance and endure bureaucratic delays affecting activities or renovations. Loudspeaker-equipped vehicles roam the Christian neighbourhoods of Damascus, exhorting residents to convert to Islam. Churches have been posted with leaflets demanding conversion or payment of the jizya – a tax on non-Muslims to purchase their safety.

No matter where they live, however, Christians are vulnerable. The law gives little recognition to Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations, exposing them to significant pressure because of the popular perception that they evangelise Muslims and are sympathetic to the West. The Orthodox Church is not free of risk, either, because

of its visibility in the community and its perceived ties to the previous regime.

Many churches are restricting their activities for security reasons, particularly following the deadly attack on Mar Elias Church in Damascus in June 2025. The attack has led many Christians to stop attending church altogether. The broader threat of further attacks and rising Islamist radicalism has driven believers to hide Christian symbols and avoid any public display of their faith, especially in majority-Islamic areas or at checkpoints.

### **GREATER EXPOSURE**

However, given the strong historical presence of the church in Syria, Syrian Christians are less able to go underground than Christian communities in other parts of the world where the church is newer. Historical Christian communities – with the Orthodox as the largest, followed by Melkite Catholics – face increasing pressure from both the current regime and extremist groups, as well as wider social hostility. Challenges include bureaucratic delays affecting activities or renovations, constant surveillance and targeted threats against religious leaders and churches. Churches have been subjected to insults, bombings and intimidation.



Two boys at the Mashta al-Helou Centre of Hope read their children's Bibles

misinformation.<sup>5</sup> Unverified footage or attacks on other religious minorities in the country have been falsely reported as attacks on Christians. Open Doors has been reporting such cases of misinformation, as have other expert organisations working in the area of FoRB. This shows the importance of governments consulting reputable sources in fast-moving contexts of persecution.

### **SYRIA POST-IS**

It's been more than ten years since so-called Islamic State group arose in eastern Syria and surged unchallenged across northern Iraq. Many thousands of Christians fled into Turkey and into the autonomous Kurdistan region in north east Iraq. As a result, the population of Christians in Syria and Iraq has dropped significantly. Open Doors estimates about 300,000 Christians remain in Syria today, down from 1.1 million in 2015. Their dwindling number leaves them more exposed, particularly in areas where state-provided security is absent.



The aftermath of the bombing of St Elias' Church

While this greater exposure has indeed meant a greater number of violent attacks, the past year has also seen a number of cases of

<sup>5</sup> See: Open Doors UK & Ireland, 2025, 'Misleading reports about "slaughter of Christians" could endanger Syrians, says Open Doors expert', 13 March 2025. <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/syria-misleading-reports/>

# THE CHURCH UNDERGROUND

Christians have been driven underground by the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Many have fled the country, but risk forcible repatriation from Pakistan and Iran. Most Christians are from Muslim backgrounds. They face harsh punishments by the authorities.

As noted above, Syrian Christians are particularly vulnerable to attack due to their long-term public presence in the country, and Syria's place on the World Watch List has risen. The opposite is the case for other countries on the World Watch List whose rankings have noticeably dropped. This should not be mistaken for an encouraging sign: it is because the Christian community has been driven underground.

Since Taliban rule was consolidated, the number of Afghans forced to leave the country almost doubled to about ten million.<sup>6</sup> Christians who fled the country, or became Christians while living as refugees, have slightly more freedom but also serious challenges, particularly in Pakistan. In 2025, about two million Afghans returned from Pakistan and Iran, the majority of these were forced returns.<sup>7</sup>

The situation for women has further deteriorated, with Christian women facing compounded vulnerability to persecution, both for their gender and their faith. Female converts to Christianity face extreme danger: discovery can lead to beatings, house arrest, forced marriage, rape or 'honour' killing. Many Christian women conceal their faith, remaining highly-isolated.

## LIBYA (9)

For Christians in Libya, the horizon remains bleak. Fewer church gatherings were attacked, as ongoing arrests and detentions have forced Christians to operate with extreme caution. The rampant instability, combined with the presence of Islamist groups and armed militias, makes Christians – especially migrants – highly vulnerable to kidnapping and execution. The absence of a unified central government capable of enforcing law and order has created an environment of extreme pressure for Christian believers.

Because of these dangers, Libyan Christians cannot openly practise their faith. Many live as secret Christians, worshipping quietly and alone, fearful of the persecution that might come if their faith were discovered. For this reason, most reports of conversions within Libya remain unpublished, as revealing such details could endanger lives.



Zakie and other Afghan refugees pray together

## AFGHANISTAN (11)

Christians in Afghanistan have gone underground since the Taliban takeover of 2021. Almost all Christians in the country are converts and conversion is punished harshly by the authorities, as well as by families. Given the risk of meeting with other Christians, the church exists only in increasingly fragmented, secretive gatherings, which makes an accurate assessment of their situation difficult.

<sup>6</sup> The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, 2025, 'Afghan asylum seekers and refugees in the UK', 29 September 2025. <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/afghan-asylum-seekers-and-refugees-in-the-uk/>

<sup>7</sup> United Nations 2025, 'Afghanistan: Returns of Afghans creating multi-layered human rights crisis', press briefing, 18 July 2025. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2025/07/afghanistan-returns-afghans-creating-multi-layered-human-rights-crisis>

# CHINA

## The next generation

**China (17)** has seen its total persecution score in the 2026 World Watch List increase by one point, mainly due to new regulations, which are being strictly implemented.

These add to a string of rules imposed from 2018 onwards – with even more promised from next year, especially on social media. The future of Christianity in China faces a critical generational crisis. In recent years, the Chinese government has intensified its control on religious exposure or affiliation for individuals under the age of 18.

### 'DANGEROUS FOR MINORS'

Roughly 224 million people in China are minors under the age of 18. Local regulations prohibit minors from affiliating with or participating in any religion-related activities. They claim religion is dangerous for minors, and prohibit them from participating in any religion-related activities, 'to help them establish a correct worldview, outlook on life, and system of values and form a healthy mind'.<sup>8</sup>

In places under government regulation, such as the Three-Self registered churches, Sunday school classes for children and young people have been officially suspended. In some areas, young people are entirely prohibited from entering church premises. Surveillance cameras are widely installed in most of the Three-Self churches nationwide, and plainclothes police occasionally come to inspect.

Because of these targeted restrictions, Christian parents and youth workers face the risk of being reprimanded, interrogated, fined or arrested as they inform influence and raise children and youth in the Christian faith.

Although such prohibition is not stipulated outright in the Constitution or in the revised Regulations on Religious Affairs (2017), the practice is rigorously observed across the country.



Young believers read the Bible together in China

Greater restrictions and heavy consequences usually apply among Protestants, Catholics, Muslim Uyghurs and Tibetan Buddhists.<sup>9</sup>

House churches, which are considered illegal, face even harsher scrutiny. Authorities have increasingly focused on curbing unauthorised youth religious activities in recent years. If a location is reported and found to host youth programmes (such as Sunday schools and summer camps), evidence such as children's books, chairs or tables may be used to justify allegations of illegal gatherings. Organisers and youth workers risk further surveillance and persecution.

### 'RELIGION AS SUPERSTITION'

Many schools have explicit regulations prohibiting any religious activities on campus. Some students at the secondary and university levels have reported receiving guidance from the school authorities through their parents, discouraging their children from attending any religious activities. Some have been required to fill out surveys about religion, and some teachers warn students against attending religious activities on Sundays and holidays. Under the context of atheistic ideology, religion is often framed as superstition.

University students attending student fellowships risk being reported for regulation violations, which can result in warnings, disciplinary actions, penalties or even expulsion. University teachers have also been warned not to share religion with students and not to bring religion into their teaching or student activities.

<sup>8</sup> Bitter Winter, 2019, 'Bans on minors' religious activities enforced throughout China', 25 October 2019. <https://bitterwinter.org/bans-on-minors-religious-activities-enforced/>

<sup>9</sup> Pew Research Center, 2023, 'Government policy toward religion in the People's Republic of China – a brief history', 30 August 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/08/30/government-policy-toward-religion-in-the-peoples-republic-of-china-a-brief-history/>

# BEYOND THE TOP 50

Some countries are surprising for their absence on the World Watch List top 50, given significant media coverage of Christian persecution. Their position on the World Watch List should not be taken to mean that Christians face no persecution or discrimination in these countries.

## ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

The war in Gaza has dominated news headlines since the Hamas terrorist attacks of 7 October 2023. However, neither Israel nor the Palestinian Territories appear in the 2026 World Watch List top 50 countries. The World Watch List records incidents of persecution or discrimination faced by Christians for faith-related reasons. While such incidents are reported to us, most of what Palestinian Christians suffer in Gaza, or the West Bank, is not directly due to their Christian faith, but as a result of the ongoing conflict.

Nonetheless, the Christian community in these lands is highly-vulnerable. Open Doors partners report significant numbers of Christians leaving the region. In Bethlehem, where ongoing Christian emigration has already put the viability of the remaining Christian community at risk, tens of families have left since the start of the conflict between Israel and Hamas more than two years ago, according to Open Doors sources. In Taybeh, north of Jerusalem, sources report multiple incidents of violence by Israeli settlers in the most recent year, and that the number of Christians now is 1,250, down from 1,500.

## WAR IN UKRAINE

The war in Ukraine has also been prominent in the news in recent years. Russia and Ukraine both sit outside the 2026 top 50. This does not indicate an absence of concern around FoRB for Christians and others in this conflict, however – only that other contexts of persecution are affecting Christians more directly for faith-related reasons. Open Doors has reported stories of Christians being attacked in the context of the conflict.<sup>10</sup>

## VIETNAM

The overall persecution score for Vietnam dropped three points in the 2026 World Watch List reporting period, due to a decrease in reported acts of violence, with no killings or church attacks reported. This was sufficient to take the country out of the top 50. An increase in pressure on Christians was reported this year, in the form of local harassment of converts at family and village levels. In particular, local authorities target non-traditional Protestants and ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands.



Ngoc\* and her daughter Mien\* have been persecuted by their communities and abandoned by their husbands

The Communist government remains silent on local issues of persecution and continues to control all registered churches and religious activities through its Committee on Religious Affairs. This represents a tactical reduction in overt, violent forms of persecution on the part of the government, which is no doubt concerned about country's international image.

<sup>10</sup> Open Doors UK & Ireland, 2025, 'Russian police invade Baptist churches in occupied Ukraine', 4 September 2025. <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/ukraine-russian-police-raids/>

# 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 ranking that remains trusted around the world. The reporting period for the World Watch List 2026 was: 1 October 2024 to 30 September 2025.

WWR works with country researchers and their in-country networks to collect 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 overestimate 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.

For each country surveyed, scores for the six categories are designated and then aggregated to determine a score out of one 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."

Country scores are based on detailed data gathered through a combination of inputs. This includes grassroots research, expert input and thorough analysis, including through:

- In-country networks: local contributors provide firsthand information about persecution incidents and pressures
- Open Doors researchers: experts within the organisation compile data using structured questionnaires
- External experts: these independent analysts cross-check and validate the data to enhance reliability
- World Watch analysts: they synthesise all inputs and create a final score for each country.

The scoring process is drawn from six thematic blocks contributing to a maximum country score of 100. These blocks are:

- Private life: pressure experienced in personal religious expression such as owning a Bible
- Family life: challenges within the family setting, including forced religious identity for children or converts being forced to divorce
- Community life: hostilities within local communities, including harassment or the denial of community resources such as water or electricity
- National life: the impact of national laws and policies leading to discrimination in public services or hate speech
- Church life: restrictions on collective Christian activities, such as the ability to attend a church or register a place of worship
- Violence: acts of physical violence, including killings and forced displacement.

For more detailed information on the World Watch List methodology, please visit: [opendoorsuk.org](http://opendoorsuk.org)

# OPEN DOORS ADVOCACY

Open Doors is a global NGO, with national offices across 25 countries, operating in more than 70 countries for over 70 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 and governments worldwide
- Locally: offering legal support, human rights and community engagement training for oppressed Christians globally.

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

If you are a legislator, civil servant, CSO worker or journalist and would like to receive Open Doors briefing materials or further information, please contact [advocacy@od.org](mailto:advocacy@od.org)



Abraham is the chairman of a displacement camp in Nigeria

## ARISE AFRICA

**In response to the immense scope of violence and pressure directed at sub-Saharan African Christians because of their faith, Open Doors is partnering with churches across the region to raise global support for the African church.**

The aim of the campaign, *Arise Africa*, is to help the African church persevere through severe persecution and be resilient, resourceful and influential. The four objectives of *Arise Africa* are:

- Every family in sub-Saharan Africa who has been directly affected by violence is supported physically, spiritually and emotionally
- The global church is awakened, united, engaged, actively praying, giving and speaking out about violence in sub-Saharan Africa
- Media are faithfully and repeatedly telling the story of violence against Christians in sub-Saharan Africa
- Influential stakeholders (governments, international institutions, and civil society) take action to address faith-based violence and strengthen the rule of law.

As part of the campaign, we have launched the *Arise Africa* petition. 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.

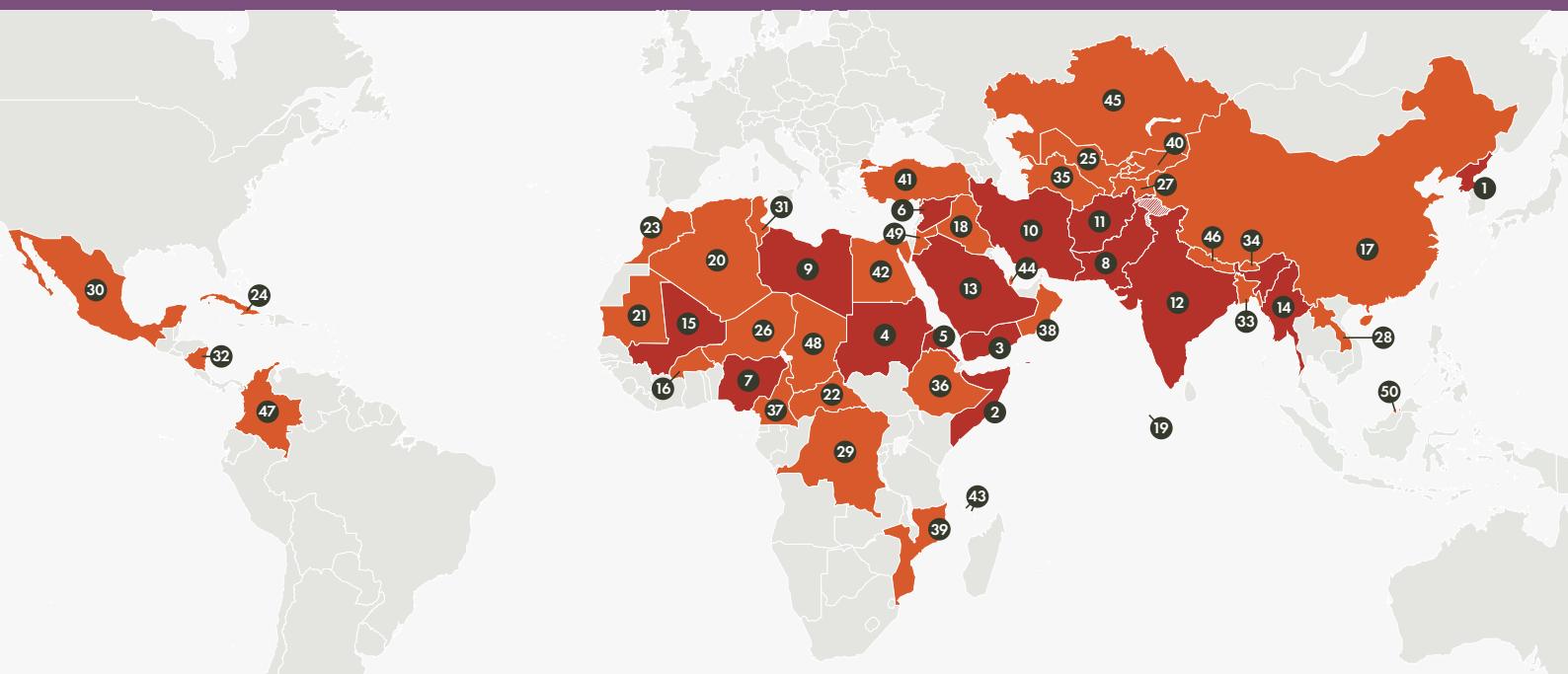
At the time of writing, the global petition has more than 413,000 signatures. This year and next, the petition will be presented formally to the EU, the UN, the African Union and governments around the world. To sign the petition, please go here: [Sign the Arise Africa Petition](#).

# 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, and through international coalitions such as the Article 18 Alliance.
2. Use the opportunities presented by **trade negotiations to promote human rights and FoRB** around the world, and to demonstrate commitment 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. Work with humanitarian actors and trusted partners to **promote religious literacy** among staff, contractors and sub-contractors to prevent discriminatory treatment in aid distribution (in particularly in the Sahel region), ensuring accountability where discrimination occurs.
4. Advocate for constitutional reforms that guarantee **full and equal citizenship for all Syrians**, regardless of religion, ethnicity, or gender, and work with global and Syria-based religious representatives to ensure these reforms are fully reflected in all related laws, including the Civil Code, personal status laws, and criminal legislation.
5. Urge governments in **Latin America to thoroughly investigate targeted attacks against Christian** leaders and ensure that those responsible are prosecuted and held accountable. The UN Security Council should explicitly and fully recognize that Faith leaders are Human Rights Defenders and should acknowledge the essential role they play.
6. Advocate against the current extensive misuse of the “anti-conversion laws” in India, recommending that the Indian government consider repealing such laws, or reform them to ensure full compatibility with international standards and with the rights recognised in the Constitution of India, to prevent abuse.
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**; grant permission to all EPA-affiliated churches to continue to use rented premises as places of worship; and to revise relevant legislation in line with international standards.
8. 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.

# THE 2026 OPEN DOORS WORLD WATCH LIST TOP 50



● EXTREME LEVELS OF PERSECUTION

1 North Korea  
2 Somalia  
3 Yemen  
4 Sudan  
5 Eritrea  
6 Syria  
7 Nigeria  
8 Pakistan  
9 Libya  
10 Iran

● VERY HIGH LEVELS OF PERSECUTION

11 Afghanistan  
12 India  
13 Saudi Arabia  
14 Myanmar  
15 Mali  
16 Burkina Faso  
17 China  
18 Iraq  
19 Maldives  
20 Algeria  
21 Mauritania  
22 Central African Republic  
23 Morocco  
24 Cuba  
25 Uzbekistan  
26 Niger  
27 Tajikistan  
28 Laos  
29 Congo DR (DRC)  
30 Mexico

31 Tunisia  
32 Nicaragua  
33 Bangladesh  
34 Bhutan  
35 Turkmenistan  
36 Ethiopia  
37 Cameroon  
38 Oman  
39 Mozambique  
40 Kyrgyzstan  
41 Türkiye  
42 Egypt  
43 Comoros  
44 Qatar  
45 Kazakhstan  
46 Nepal  
47 Colombia  
48 Chad  
49 Jordan  
50 Brunei



SERVING PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS WORLDWIDE

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