

Press release: World Watch List 2022

Afghanistan the most dangerous place to be a Christian as Taliban takeover emboldens Islamist extremists worldwide

Embargo: KI 14:00, 19th January 2022

Afghanistan is now the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian, according to figures released today in the 2022 World Watch List (WWL).

Afghanistan replaces North Korea at the top of the list after 20 years – this despite persecution also rising there this year.

The WWL, which records levels of persecution and discrimination across the globe, found that over 360 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith – a rise of 20 million from last year. The number represents one in seven Christians worldwide. This year records the highest levels of persecution since the first list was published 29 years ago, and in recent years has plotted a steady increase.

Afghanistan – the brutal reality

The report paints a shocking picture of life for Afghanistan's small, deeply hidden, Christian population, suggesting that:

- Christian men are facing almost certain death if their faith is discovered.
- Women and girls may escape death but may be married to young Taliban fighters who want "spoils of war". When women and girls are raped, they will be trafficked.
- The incoming Taliban government gained access to recordings and reports that helped to identify Christians who were often detained, in order to identify networks of Christians, before being killed.
- Taliban fighters are actively tracking down Christians from existing intelligence, even going door-to-door to find them.
- Much of the Christian population has fled to rural regions or refugee camps in neighboring nations – all of which feature in the WWL as countries hostile to Christians.

Emboldened: the 'Talibanization' of West Africa and beyond

Meanwhile, the fall of Kabul has fuelled a new mood of invulnerability among other jihadist groups worldwide. The groups believe that they won't face serious opposition from the West for their expansionist agendas and are exploiting nations with weak or corrupt governments. Its effects are not yet fully felt in the WWL 2022 reporting period (1 October 2020 till 30 September 2021) but there are strong signs it is set to further boost violence in countries such as Nigeria (#7), Mali (#24), CAR (#31), Burkina Faso (#32), Niger (#33) and DRC (#40) – countries with already high levels of violence.

The current jihadist expansion has moved Nigeria's former Head of Naval Intelligence, Commodore Kunli Olawunmi to describe a concerted strategy of 'Talibanization' in Nigeria by the jihadist groups –

a deliberate, religiously-motivated degrading of security and order in which state actors and tribal groups are complicit.[1] In Nigeria a total of 4,650 Christians has been recorded as killed – 79 per cent of the worldwide total.

We can see a similar strategy by jihadist groups and their supporters elsewhere in the region.

- Sub-Saharan Africa, already the place where violence against Christians is highest, has faced further steep rises in jihadist violence, with fears that a significant part of the region faces destabilization.
- Social order in Mali, (#24 on the WWL) is deteriorating fast, with fears it could become the 'next Afghanistan' with insurgency spilling into neighbouring countries Niger and Burkina Faso.
- Both the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), plagued by the Alliance of Democratic Forces, and the Central African Republic (CAR) have joined Nigeria in the top ten list for levels of violence.

Den pågående volden og destabiliseringen i disse områdene får alvorlige konsekvenser ettersom hundretusener rundt om i verden flykter fra hjemmene sine.

«Endringen der Afghanistan klatrer opp til toppen av World Watch List er dypt urovekkende, sier Morten Askeland, generalsekretær i Åpne Dører. «I tillegg til den lidelsen dette representerer for en hel befolkning, sender det et tydelig budskap til islamske ekstremister overalt: 'Du kan uhindret fortsette din brutale kamp for makt og innflytelse.' Fraksjoner som *Den islamske stat* og *Alliance of Democratic Forces* (ADF) for fornyet håp om å nå sitt mål om et islamsk kalifat – de ble stoppet i Irak og Syria – nå øyner de muligheten. De menneskelige kostnadene i form av lidelse og død dette kan føre til, er vanskelig å overvurdere.»

The 'refugee' church

An estimated 84 million people have been forced to leave their homes, either internally displaced, or, for an estimated 26.6 million, as refugees in other nations[2]. A significant number are Christians, fleeing religious persecution:

- In parts of sub-Saharan Africa the Christian population has simply emptied out and left. In the past few years, hundreds of churches have been closed in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and 470 in Nigeria for this reporting period alone.
- Hundreds of thousands have fled Islamist violence (e.g., in the Sahel region) or are fleeing forced conscription (Eritrea #6), civil conflict (Sudan #13), state repression (Iran #9), and/or family oppression due to their faith.
- Christian IDPs and refugees continue to live in Iraq (#14), Syria (#15), Lebanon, and Jordan (#39) amongst others. As Christians they can be denied humanitarian and other practical assistance by authorities.
- In Myanmar (#12), at least 200,000 Christians have been internally displaced and 20,000 fled the country as Christian regions have been targeted in the ongoing conflict.

Often, when people have fled their homes, they are even more vulnerable. Christian women fleeing their homes and seeking safety report sexual assault to be the leading source of persecution, with multiple reports of women and children subjected to rape, sexual slavery, and more, both in camps

and while they journey in search of safety. Poverty and insecurity compound their vulnerability, with some drawn into prostitution to survive.

As jihadism spreads and destabilizes nations, we can expect this Christian exodus to multiply further.

‘One country, one people, one creed’ – the suffocation of diversity

As China’s (#17) economic influence spreads across the world, so too does its authoritarian imposition of conformity on its citizens. This extends to pretty much every area of life; speech, belief, and behavior.

From May 2021 new legislation required China’s religious leaders to “love the motherland, support the leadership of the Communist Party and the socialist system”. They must not “undermine national unity”.

This is enforced by the ruling party’s use of pioneering technology to surveil and control its citizens. In two provinces, all official Christian churches have surveillance cameras installed.

And this technologically fuelled authoritarianism is rapidly spreading far beyond China. Numerous other nations have seen the way this imposition of “unity” over diversity has been rolled out by the ruling Communist Party.

- [Open Doors’ recent India \(#10\) report](#) describes a nation being drawn further into nationalist ‘Hindutva’ ideology, where to be Indian is to be Hindu. A wave of vigilante violence against Christians and other religious minorities, has been overlooked or even encouraged by political leaders across the nation, and accompanied by a surge in misinformation and propaganda from mainstream and social media.
- A similar model of loyalty and homogeneity is seen in nations as diverse as Myanmar (#12), Malaysia (#50), Sri Lanka (#52) and the central Asian states. All these face increased restrictions for those who deviate from the creed of ‘one country, one people, one creed’.
- Under Communist ideology in the Americas, the Covid-19 pandemic has been used as a pretext to surveil churches and impose further restrictions. In Cuba (entering the list at #37), after July’s protests, church leaders who spoke out were detained and tortured. In Nicaragua (#61) and Venezuela (#65), the ruling parties promoted smear campaigns against Catholic bishops, cancelled registration permits and closed churches.

Other key trends this year

High rising nations

Along with Afghanistan, there are several countries with noteworthy rises in recorded persecution. These include

- **Qatar (#18 from #29)**, the host for this year’s World Cup, where converts from Islam especially face physical, psychological and (for women) sexual violence.
- **Indonesia (#28 from #47)**, where Christians faced two attacks in Central Sulawesi, as well as a bomb attack against the cathedral in Makassar.
- **Myanmar (#12 from #18)**, where the army has attacked Christian villages and churches, driving more than 200,000 into IDP camps.

- **Bhutan (#34 from #43)**, where converts especially face community pressure and violence – in the case of women, sexual violence.

Rising violence, unrelenting pressure

Recorded killings of Christians for their faith rose from 4,761 registered cases (WWL 2021) to 5,898 (WWL 2022). Sub-Saharan Africa, and Nigeria especially, accounts for the bulk of these.

The total number of churches attacked rose from 4,488 registered cases (WWL 2021) to 5,110 (WWL 2022) and detentions and arrests rising 44 per cent (from WWL 2021) to 6,175, with 1,315 of these in India.

However, while overt violence may be more attention-grabbing, the everyday unrelenting pressure upon Christian communities is just as important and continues to rise. These express themselves in a myriad of subtle and overt forms: discrimination at work, pressure to renounce your faith from family members, being placed at the back of the queue for aid and medicine – particularly during COVID, bureaucracy preventing the licensing of churches, and much more.

North Korea

Despite dropping to second place, persecution levels in North Korea have actually reached record highs this year. With a new anti-reactionary thought law', it has seen a rise in Christians arrested and house churches closed. Arrest inevitably means imprisonment in one of the nation's brutal 're-education camps', from which few people emerge alive.

Crumbs of comfort

Iraq (#14 from #11), Syria (#15 from #12), Egypt (#20 from #16), and Turkey (#42 from #25) have seen reductions in violence. Although it may just be that there were fewer opportunities for active persecution during the COVID pandemic, it is still welcome.

«Årets World Watch List er urovekkende» sier Morten Askeland generalsekretær i Åpne Dører. «Med selvsikre islamister, gjenoppstått nasjonalisme og et Kina med stadig mer sofistikerte former for digital forfølgelse, virker det som om vi går inn i en tid med svekkede menneskerettigheter. Trosfriheten er grunnlag for så mange andre friheter. Derfor trenger vi desperat å se en fornyelse av forpliktelsen til å styrke denne delen av menneskerettighetene i 2022. I en tid hvor menneskerettighetene er under press, og hvor til og med den verbale støtten til disse rettighetene avtar, er det viktigere enn noen gang å fremme og beskytte trosfriheten.»

[1] Insecurity: The Govt Knows Sponsors of Boko Haram, Says Former Naval Chief, 25 August 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KyHowYHyAp8>

[2] <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>

For mer informasjon om *World Watch List*, og avtale om intervju, kontakt informasjonsleder: Linda Askeland, tlf 93252304

The WWL in numbers

Open Doors' 2022 World Watch List. (2021 rankings in brackets)

- 1 Afghanistan (2)
- 2 North Korea (1)
- 3 Somalia (3)
- 4 Libya (4)
- 5 Yemen (7)
- 6 Eritrea (6)
- 7 Nigeria (9)
- 8 Pakistan (5)
- 9 Iran (8)
- 10 India (10)
- 11 Saudi Arabia (14)
- 12 Myanmar (18)
- 13 Sudan (13)
- 14 Iraq (11)
- 15 Syria (12)
- 16 Maldives (15)
- 17 China (17)
- 18 Qatar (29)
- 19 Vietnam (19)
- 20 Egypt (16)
- 21 Uzbekistan (21)
- 22 Algeria (24)
- 23 Mauritania (20)
- 24 Mali (28)
- 25 Turkmenistan (23)
- 26 Laos (22)
- 27 Morocco (27)
- 28 Indonesia (47)
- 29 Bangladesh (31)
- 30 Colombia (30)
- 31 Central African Republic (35)
- 32 Burkina Faso (32)
- 33 Niger (54)
- 34 Bhutan (43)
- 35 Tunisia (26)
- 36 Oman (44)
- 37 Cuba (51)
- 38 Ethiopia (36)
- 39 Jordan (38)
- 40 Congo DR (DRC) (40)
- 41 Mozambique (45)
- 42 Turkey (25)
- 43 Mexico (37)
- 44 Cameroon (42)
- 45 Tajikistan (33)
- 46 Brunei (39)
- 47 Kazakhstan (41)
- 48 Nepal (34)
- 49 Kuwait (48)
- 50 Malaysia (46)

Beyond the top 50, five more countries are also scored 'very high'. Overall, 76 countries - two more (Israel and Venezuela) than the previous year - showed extreme, very high or high levels of persecution and discrimination, affecting at least one in every seven Christians worldwide.

How many Christians are persecuted?

Persecution of Christians has continued to intensify globally, reaching the highest levels since the list began nearly 30 years ago.

- More than 360 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith.
- This number represents one in seven Christians worldwide, up from one in eight in the 2021 list.

About the WWL and how the figures are collected.

The first annual WWL was recorded in January 1993. Countries' overall persecution scores are an amalgamation of six different scores: for violence levels, along with persecution in private life, family life, community life, civic life and of church communities. This year's list covers the period 1 Oct 2020 - 30 Sept 2021.

Released at the beginning of each year, the list uses extensive research, data from Open Doors field workers, external experts and persecution analysts to quantify and analyse persecution worldwide. It is certified by the International Institute for Religious Freedom.

Covid-19 restrictions necessitated adaptations in on-ground data collection. With additional digital tools and experts' research, Open Doors believes the WWL 2022 scoring, and analysis maintains its quality and reliability. Learn more about the [methodology for the WWL](#).