PERSECUTION TRENDS 2025

From the Middle East to Africa, Asia and even Europe, Christians are facing sustained and, in some cases, growing persecution and hostility from militant groups and repressive governments. In this year's annual Persecution Trends report, Release International partners describe how Christians have been treated in the past 12 months and look ahead to the challenges they are likely to face in the coming year

Ukrainian Orthodox churches are among those that have been targeted by the Russians

EUROPE

UKRAINE

The persecution of Christians in the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia since the invasion of 2022 has been systematically increasing, said our partners.

'Only the Moscow Orthodox Church is recognised.. All other Ukrainian churches have been closed down and their buildings seized.

'Ukrainian Christians in the occupied territories are obligated to obtain Russian citizenship and re-register their churches under Russian law. They need to sever all connections with churches in other parts of Ukraine, as well as in the West. If not, they will be considered spies. Even praying for Ukraine is criminalised by the Russian regime.'

In 2023 and last year Ukrainian evangelicals in the occupied territories became underground believers, after 95 per cent of church buildings were seized. Christians met in small groups in homes but when these were raided some were detained and others deported.

Our partners expect that in 2025 Christians in the occupied territories will remain under pressure to obtain Russian citizenship but believers will carry on meeting in small groups, which is unlawful and makes them vulnerable to arrest. It is possible the Russians will try to create show churches, controlled by the Federal Security Service (FSB), to provide an impression of freedom of worship in the Ukrainian areas they control. Meanwhile underground church leaders will be harassed, threatened with arrest, beatings and deportation. Their lives may also be at risk.

'The majority of Ukrainian Christians have already fled the occupied territories. Those who remain will have to choose between becoming Russian citizens, which may allow them some freedom to function in the FSB-controlled churches, or staying true to their original calling and continuing underground. If they [choose the latter], they will face increasing pressure. Basically, all forms of harassment and persecution may be expected because the Russian regime will not tolerate any form of Ukrainian Christianity in their territories.'

'The war has a strong religious component'

Our partners added: *'The war has a strong religious component. [Vladimir] Putin is building his regime, working hand in hand with the Moscow Orthodox Church through which he wants to control the hearts and minds of citizens. He has already achieved this goal in Russia itself.*

'Ukrainian Christians have no doubt that in each city and village taken by Russians freedom of worship will be over and they will have to go underground. Some of our key partners said that, if captured by the Russians, they would be killed.'

SOUTH ASIA

INDIA

India saw growing persecution of Christians in 2024 which, said our partners, was expected to continue.

One partner said that believers were about to enter 2025 with *'fear and anxiety'* although at the same time added, *'but we trust the Lord'.*

During the past 12 months Christians witnessed the physical and emotional abuse and harassment of pastors and other believers, including women and children, across the country but particularly in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Karnataka states.

Persecution also manifested itself in the destruction of church buildings, notably in Manipur, Rajasthan, Telangana and Uttar Pradesh; false imprisonment, especially in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh; and the filing of false police cases and prohibition of home prayer meetings nationwide.

Our partner believes that the increase in persecution has been fuelled by key factors: retaliation by Hindu extremists against losses for the ruling BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) in May's general election; the growing political power of the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and a lack of understanding internationally of Hindutva (an ideology that seeks to make Hinduism dominant in India), showing itself in continued foreign support for Modi.

Election losses for the BJP has been cited as one of the factors fuelling increased Christian persecution

Another partner pointed to the impact of the expansion of anti-conversion laws across India.

'Nationwide it is estimated that 3,000 Christian leaders and pastors are held in various jails under these charges,' it said. *'The persecution is steadily increasing and becoming more severe, largely due to the policies of the current Government.'* In one region, it said, church leaders were *'constantly in fear'.*

'Already restrictions are increasing'

According to partners, the expected rise in persecution in 2025 is likely to include the confiscation of Bibles; the continued rape and killing of Christian women and children; the ongoing prohibition of home meetings of Christians – not just worship services, but prayer meetings, and even house warmings and birthday parties; and the continued use of government-sponsored hotlines to inform on Christian neighbours. Christians' homes and villages may face destruction with many forced to flee.

'Already restrictions are increasing, with some Christians barred from doing business, travelling on public transport or even drawing water from village wells.'

It is feared that there will be more arrests and imprisonments, more Christians being displaced from their homes and even martyrdom.

Another partner suggests Christians may face restrictions on certain foods, while pointing to reports it had received that the Government *'may soon declare Sunday a working day, affecting church attendance and worship'.*

Since it took control in 2021 the Taliban has imposed more restrictions on Afghans

AFGHANISTAN

Christians are facing growing persecution in Afghanistan because, since the Taliban took over in 2021, they have been imposing *Sharia* (Islamic law) in greater areas of life, said our partners.

'Christians face ... social, economic, religious and physical persecution. Lots of Afghans are fleeing to Pakistan, Iran and other countries, because they are afraid that, as soon as their Christian faith is disclosed, they might be persecuted or killed.

'According to [the Taliban's] Sharia, conversion to any other religion is an offence, punishable by death.'

As a result, any Christian who shares their faith with a neighbour could face serious consequences.

Our partners said: *'In our region in 2025, we expect to see more arrests and imprisonments, more Christians martyred for their faith [or] being either displaced or forced to flee their homes.'*

SRI LANKA

While physical attacks on Christians in Sri Lanka are declining, legal restrictions are on the rise and intensifying, said our partner.

'In the coming year, Christians are likely to face heightened challenges stemming from restrictive laws and regulations, particularly those enforcing mandatory registration for churches. Based on current trends, these legal measures are expected to increasingly hinder church activities, making it harder for smaller, independent churches to gather and operate openly.'

It anticipates a rise in church closures, as authorities impose legal restrictions, such as mandatory registration, to curtail Christian gatherings and activities.

'Additionally, Hindu extremist groups are gaining influence in the northern, eastern and central provinces, primarily targeting Christian evangelistic work under the pretext of opposing conversions. These groups have been systematically campaigning against Christian outreach efforts, often in collaboration with extremist Buddhist monks who also view conversions as a threat.'

It added: *'Legal restrictions have proven highly effective in curbing church activities. These measures tend to draw less public attention despite their substantial impact, making them the preferred tool of suppression.'*

In 2024, our partner documented 42 incidents of religious liberty violations against Christians, predominantly involving threats, intimidation, coercion and discrimination. Additionally, incidents of property damage, online hate campaigns and physical violence were reported. The main perpetrators included local state officials, Buddhist monks and extremist Hindu groups.

PAKISTAN

Persecution in Pakistan is increasing gradually, said one of our partners. Or, as another described it, *'it's increasing day by day'*, not helped by the conflict in the Middle East. Christians are seen by many in Pakistan as pro-Israeli so *'they want to take revenge by killing Christians in Pakistan'.* At the same time instability in the Government during the past five years has allowed extremism to grow.

'As Christians, we always have to be mindful of how someone may perceive our message when we are talking [about Christ].'

They said that, due to the rise of extremist religious political parties, there had been an increase in hatred towards Christians. *'If someone gets to*

know about a Christian's faith identity, they immediately start mistreating them.'

They expect many Christians to suffer in the coming year. *'Currently there is a trend of killing the accused before their arrest because people have become their own law enforcers. Due to this, many Christian families are constantly trying to flee their homes and migrate to safer areas, but they are always in danger.'*

'The mere accusation of blasphemy can put you at risk of physical harm'

They said that as a result of the rise of religious political parties, more people were becoming passionate about taking someone else's life in the name of religion. Younger people were being radicalised at madrasas (Islamic schools), while militants were getting trained in how to file complaints against Christians.

'Young Muslims are being taught and trained as extremists. This ideology is increasing hatred, discrimination and persecution against Christians in Pakistan.'

In 2024, religious minorities, especially Christians, continued to face persecution in various forms – social, political and religious – ranging from blasphemy accusations and forced conversions to mob killings and destruction of places of worship. Christians also faced discrimination in education and in employment.

Our partner said that believers were living with the fear of being accused of blasphemy. *'All Christians at work, schools, offices, churches and even at home are not safe. They are scared of false accusations at any time by anyone. The mere accusation of blasphemy can put you at risk of physical harm.'*

Moreover, there have been multiple cases of abduction, forced conversion, sexual abuse and religious discrimination.

Our partners, who have helped to defuse tensions in local communities, thereby potentially saving many lives, fear that in 2025 Christians will continue to be falsely accused of blasphemy (sometimes to destroy a Christian's business) and forced to flee. The rise of extremism will lead to more arrests and imprisonments and even martyrdom.

'If this mob culture is not [dealt with], we are likely to face more cases of false blasphemy, mob lynching, discrimination and forced conversions,' said our partners.

AFRICA

NIGERIA

The violent persecution of Christians in Nigeria is on the rise and looks set to continue into 2025, said our partners, Stefanos Foundation.

Radicalised Fulani herdsmen are *'on the rampage, killing Christians and over-running their communities in order to grab their land with impunity, especially in the middle belt of Nigeria'*, it said.

'The rise in the number of Islamic extremist groups operating in Nigeria like Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Fulani militant herdsmen and Fulani bandit sects has led to unprecedented violence against Christians. They have been operating unhindered and gaining more territories not only in northern Nigeria but also in the southern region.'

Stefanos expects this trend to continue in 2025.

'Nigeria has been recognised as one of the most dangerous places to be a Christian with over 8,000 Christians reportedly killed in 2023 alone because of their faith.

Armed Fulani herdsmen have terrorised Christian communities

'And over four million refugees, mostly Christian farmers, have been displaced due to violence (ADF International, 2024). Christians in Nigeria are to expect more violence, death, kidnappings and displacement in 2025.'

Stefanos pointed to the implementation of Sharia (Islamic law) by 12 northern states, which had resulted in a *'huge number of Christians experiencing threats, intimidation, marginalisation and discrimination almost daily'*.

It said Christians were likely to experience more discrimination in employment, education and access to resources especially in northern Nigeria.

'Christians may face targeted violence and death from terrorist groups, forced marriages and coerced conversion of Christians especially women, teenage girls and children. Those who survive attacks may end up displaced and severely impoverished.'

BURKINA FASO

In 2024 Christians suffered many forms of persecution, notably violent attacks from armed groups, death threats and forced expulsion from their villages.

According to local NGOs and the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa, approximately 25 per cent of attacks in the northern and eastern regions of the country specifically targeted Christian communities, causing the displacement of thousands of people.

Stock photo

Rural Christian communities are particularly vulnerable to attack in Burkina Faso

And this persecution of Christians is increasing, according to the analysis of many sources and trends observed in the region. The rise is mainly due to the growing power of jihadists active in the immediate, sub-Saharan belt across Africa known as the Sahel, who directly target Christian communities. Rural areas, where Christians are often minorities, are particularly vulnerable.

In addition, the deterioration in infrastructure and the growing inability of the state to provide security in these regions exacerbate the problem. It is feared that, without more intervention, the pressure on Christians will only increase in the years ahead. The strengthening of these armed extremist groups and the political instability render the protection of Christians more difficult.

Jihadists seek not only to control the territory, but also to eradicate non-Islamic religious practices, particularly Christianity.

This means that multiple pressures are looming for Christians in 2025. The extremists' violence is likely to continue – and may intensify in the north, east, Sahel and Boucle (central west) regions – leading to the forced displacement of increasing numbers to camps in urban areas where they may be isolated and without access to a stable means of livelihood. According to multiple sources, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) continues to increase each year, in particular among rural Christian communities.

This climate of fear and economic marginalisation will put Christians' means of survival to the test and may continue to restrain their freedom to practise their beliefs.

ERITREA

Our partner, Dr Berhane Asmelash of Release Eritrea, said that persecution intensified in 2024 and unless the Eritrean Government changed its policy in 2025, which was unlikely, more Christians would be arrested and mistreated.

'We believe it is a desperate attempt to control the growth of the evangelical population in the country. During the past 20 years the number has grown exponentially in spite of the harsh treatment of Christians.

'We are expecting more arrests and severe punishment and torture of Christians. The prison food is inedible but food and medicine are not officially allowed to be taken to Christian prisoners. That is the reason many Christians die inside the prison.'

Berhane Asmelash

Dr Asmelash said the total number of believers in prison was more than 400; half of these had been arrested during the past two years. *'If the current trend continues as it is now, we are expecting more arrests and possible martyrdom.'*

He said that many of the recently arrested Christians were families that included children and nursing mothers. *'About 56 of them have been taken to labour camps on government farms in western Eritrea. For many it is their second or third time of arrest.'*

EASTERN ASIA

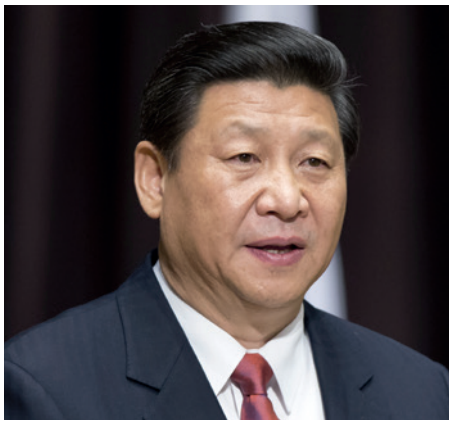
CHINA

Persecution of Christians in China is increasing and continues to be at its worst level since the Cultural Revolution, said our partners.

This is because of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policy of 'sinicization' which seeks to infiltrate churches with communist ideology and 'Xi Jinping Thought', making Christianity more palatable to the Government, with the end goal of assimilation. In practice this means preaching and promoting doctrines that support and comply with the CCP's leadership, ideology and values.

As a result there will be ongoing pressures in 2025 to conform to a surveillance state intent on reducing the growth and influence of the church.

The year ahead is likely to result in increased arrests and imprisonments. Christians are not being directly martyred for their faith, although some may die as a result of not being able to cope physically or mentally with imprisonment and torture. Reports of Christians leaving China, including pastors who fear being blacklisted and therefore prevented from travelling, are likely to continue.



President Xi Jinping continues to seek religious 'sinicization' in China

NORTH KOREA

Persecution of Christians always remains high in North Korea, said our partner, Voice of the Martyrs Korea (VOMK).

This is because the Government regards religion as a tool that foreign powers use to colonize other countries.

VOMK said that more citizens in North Korea were forming negative opinions about the Government because of the lack of official support people received during the Covid crisis. Due to this, the state had intensified its crackdown on signs of foreign influence, including religion, among civilians. Tightening border security had also been one of the main ways in which Pyongyang had sought to limit external influence.

'During Covid, officials were less inclined to carry out detailed house searches out of a concern for contracting the disease, so Christians were able to make good use of this opportunity to [move materials around] or, in some cases, even to meet. Christians may face increased pressures as strict monitoring procedures return or even exceed past levels.'

VOMK said it was likely that more Christians will be arrested, imprisoned, martyred and displaced due to technological developments and an increase in North Korea's general crackdown on foreign influences in 2025. It was also likely that North Korean believers living in China will be arrested, imprisoned, and displaced, but not that they would be martyred, although *'they may be sent back to North Korea where they could be martyred'.*

It said the Chinese Government had become increasingly active in repatriating North Korean defectors who were looking to flee to South Korea. However, it seems that local officials have been working to provide documentation and residency status to defectors who had settled in China, as long as they engaged in religious activities only amongst themselves, making sure especially not to associate with foreigners or ethnically Korean-Chinese citizens.

CENTRAL ASIA

The intensity of the persecution of Christians in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Karakalpakstan (an autonomous region within Uzbekistan), Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan is expected to remain broadly unchanged in 2025, said our partner.

Christians will continue to face fines for taking their children to church and for holding meetings illegally (since they lack state registration). And only in isolated cases (in places where Christians have developed good relations with local authorities) will the situation be more normal.

'Although these countries have secular constitutions, in reality, the level of Islamic influence continues to grow, inspired by political, economic and financial pressure from states such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan.'

Radical groups linked with the governments can also stir up local opposition to Christians.

Another driver of hostility towards

Christians in general and evangelicals in particular in these states closely connected to Russia is Moscow's position that, unless churches are Russian Orthodox, they are 'agents of western countries' and their pastors are 'American spies'.

In 2024 there were no reported cases of severe persecution of the type seen in previous years but many Christians had been subjected to ridicule, threats of arson and even murder as well as facing large fines.

SOUTHEAST ASIA

MALAYSIA

'It is our sincere opinion that the persecution has increased, but due to fear and threats most is kept silent and does not come to public attention,' said our partners.

The reason for this increased persecution is that Malaysia wants to officially become an Islamic nation and therefore needs to have a majority Muslim population, they added.

They believe that in 2025 the strongest pressure will come in the area of business. Companies registered in Malaysia must have a Muslim as a partner (51 per cent); and to obtain a *halal* certification costs significantly more for non-Muslims. So to avoid higher costs and taxes, many are converting to Islam.

Christian businesses that are unable to secure the loans or licences they need to operate will be forced to close.

At the same time, hatred towards Christians was *'increasing on a regular basis and the violence is not being investigated or ever comes to court'.*

Converts are continuously the target of the authorities and face loss of employment, rejection from family and community and even imprisonment.

Our partners said: *'There are thousands of Muslims in Malaysia who accepted Christ as Lord, but due to Sharia they cannot go [openly] to church and are forced to stay in hiding and meet in house churches.'*

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

IRAN

Iranian converts, particularly ministry workers and leaders, are expected to face increasing pressures in 2025, said one of our partners working in the country.

'The very fear of persecution is a worry as believers meeting in house groups do not know if they are under surveillance or not. These pressures have led to an exodus of some believers [and ministry] workers from Iran (mainly to Turkey) and this exodus is likely to continue in 2025.

'Persecution is on the increase because the authorities are aware of the growth in the number of converts and house churches and are determined at all costs to stem this. In fact their overall goal is to exterminate the Persian-speaking church and allow only Christian minority groups to operate. Longer prison sentences are being given to some Christian workers [although] some workers have been released.' Others are on bail awaiting trial.

There is no doubt that the Government is concerned by those becoming Christians and as such is unwilling to acknowledge converts' rights. Last year Christians involved in any form of ministry were particularly targeted.

'Thankfully there has not been a wave of persecution against those who have converted – even though some of these can face opposition from family or harassment in their work or studies – [but] there is obviously a campaign to try to stop the spread of Christianity, to arrest those who are leading house churches and those who are involved in evangelism and teaching.'

The demonstrations of 2022-23 under the banner of 'Woman, Life, Freedom' were suppressed but the ongoing controls, repression and increased surveillance only add pressure on believers, house churches and Christian activity.

'It will interesting to see if the new President, Masoud Pezeshkian, who is a reformist politician, can bring about any meaningful changes and show a greater level of tolerance.'

'Christians are an easy target'

Another partner working with Iranian Christians in Turkey said: *'In Turkey the rate [of persecution] appears to have been steadily increasing over the past couple of years. This seems to have occurred primarily as a policy of the Turkish authorities to reduce the number of refugees, but the increased Islamist profile adds a specific dimension against Christians.'*

Many Iranian refugees who have been living in Turkey for years are finding it increasingly difficult to remain and some are facing deportation back to Iran.

'Christians, especially those identified as coming from a Muslim background, are an easy target, both with "informal" local persecution when

Gendarmes seal shut the doors of a church in Algeria

being stopped by authority figures and also when put through the legal system.'

These pressures in Turkey are likely to remain in the coming year, while in Iran itself, the focus may continue to be much more on the risk of escalating conflict with Israel. Christians there, often painted by the authorities as agents of the West, were at risk of detention and being held as scapegoats in the event of any perceived catastrophic action, said our partners.

EGYPT

Christians in Egypt have faced numerous waves of persecution over the years, often supported by political authorities.

'In recent times and with the current Government, we are very thankful that such support is absent. Nonetheless, everyday experiences still involve milder forms of persecution, including discrimination and tensions between Christian and Muslim families and individuals, especially in isolated villages. Disputes can frequently escalate into religious confrontations,' said our partner.

Furthermore, numerous individuals have been forced to leave their homes due to persecution and move to remote areas. Women and girls are subjected to continuous harassment, abuse and persecution; some are drawn into romantic relationships or offered financial rewards to embrace Islam.

There is also religious-based discrimination in appointments to government jobs but instances of discrimination and religious conflict are most common in smaller villages and rural areas.

Our partner said: *'Sharia-based personal status laws comprise a set of regulations that regulate familial relationships. These laws address critical areas such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and financial support, playing an important role in clarifying the rights and duties of family members. Christians may experience various challenges when dealing with these matters.'*

IRAQ

In 2025 Christians in the Middle East, including Iraq, are likely to face ongoing pressures, particularly due to their minority status and the region's complex political and social dynamics, said our partners.

With a total Christian population of around 250,000, which includes about 10,000 evangelicals, believers will continue to experience societal discrimination, limited job opportunities and restrictions on religious gatherings. And as regional tensions persist and extremist elements remain active, Christians may face threats to their personal safety, targeted violence and vandalism of churches and other properties.

Additionally, the pressure to convert or conform to the dominant religious beliefs may increase, particularly for evangelical and other minority Christian groups. This will likely drive more individuals to seek refuge outside the region.

In 2025, while killings specifically due to faith are unlikely, Christians will still face serious risks. In Iraq, as a Muslim-majority nation, social pressures and local hostilities often force Christians, especially converts, to flee their homes to seek safety elsewhere.

'Although arrests or imprisonments may not be a primary concern, we expect a continued influx of Christian refugees and displaced individuals, driven by social rejection and threats.'

In 2024 persecution of Christians in the region appeared to increase marginally at most, but the ongoing instability and social pressures meant that Christians, particularly converts, continued to face threats. Many, including those seeking visas for the West, had been forced to remain in the region for extended periods.

ALGERIA

The persecution of Christians in Algeria is expected to be largely unchanged in 2025, said our partners.

The authorities continue to close churches and convict Christian leaders for holding unauthorised worship. In September and October 2024 three leaders were summoned to court.

The Government does not want to formalise the registration of the Protestant church in Algeria, along with other Christian organisations, so in 2025 believers are likely to face legal challenges and harassment from the security services; disciplinary hearings and dismissal of Christian workers in the public sector and in education; interrogation, harassment and searches at ports and airports; and bureaucratic hold-ups at every level.

Our partner expects *'an increase in pressure on indigenous Christians. There is a risk that Christians will leave Algeria in large numbers or be obliged to move within the country'.*

The political change that has taken place since December 2019 has driven several church leaders to flee abroad, but others have stayed behind to stand in solidarity with the Christian community in Algeria.