

World
Watch
Research

WWL 2024

Summary of Trends

February 2024 edition



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

February 2024 edition

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Brief note on methodology, access to further information and copyright

- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology together with various other background documents can be found on the pages of the Open Doors International and Open Doors Analytical websites.¹
- WWL 2024 Full Country Dossiers giving in-depth information on the situation of Christians in the 78 countries listed are available at the above-mentioned websites under the heading Full country dossiers.²
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
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¹ <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/> (password: freedom)

² <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/country-dossiers/> and <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/country-dossiers/> (password: freedom)

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1. Religiously motivated violence intensifies as Sub-Saharan Africa destabilizes

Violence targeting Christians has long been a defining characteristic of the persecution pattern south of the great desert. That trend intensified during the World Watch List 2024 reporting period.

Of the 26 Sub-Saharan countries with overall scores at or above “High” levels of persecution, 16 had “Extremely High” scores in the violence subcategory. A year ago, the number of countries with scores in the “Extremely High” violence tier was 13.

Driving the general rise in violence on the 2024 list was an increase in attacks on churches and Christian homes and businesses. Evidence of the increasing intensity could be found in, for example, Ethiopia, where the number of attacks on churches and public Christian properties such as schools grew sharply. The number of Christian-owned businesses burned, looted, or confiscated in Burkina Faso and Central African Republic surged.

In 18 of the 26 Sub-Saharan countries with at least “High” overall levels of persecution, at least 4,606 Christians were killed because of their faith during the 12-month reporting period for the 2024 list, which concluded 30 September 2023. There were no recorded killings in the remaining eight of those 26 countries. And, as in the previous year, Nigeria accounted for about 9 of every 10 of those religiously motivated killings in Sub-Saharan Africa’s World Watch List countries. The number of killings in these countries is likely to be much higher because in conflict and in the aftermath of conflict it is difficult to get reliable reports on the impact of violence.

Beyond mortal attacks, the displacement of Christians from their homes and communities is an important measure of anti-Christian violence. Data from Switzerland-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees indicate that at the end of 2022, 34.5 million people were living as forcibly displaced persons (refugees and IDPs) in the Sub-Saharan African countries that have at least “High” levels of persecution on the World Watch List.

Of those 34.5 million, an estimated 16.2 million were Christians. That represents about 3% of the 534 million Christians who live in the 26 Sub-Saharan countries with at least “High” overall levels of persecution.

Why the increase in violence? The big African picture is complex and individual incidents occur along a wide spectrum of local circumstances, but a common thread is the exploitation of destabilizing conditions across the continent by radical Islamic elements. One example: The already deteriorating security situation in Mali lost its veneer of international security structure when French troops finally left in November 2022 and U.N. mission (MINUSMA) will have completely withdrawn by the end of December 2023, creating more room for jihadist aggression.

Another: Military coups that forced regime change in Niger and Gabon in 2023 were only the latest in a [string of overthrows](#)³ going back to 2022 and 2021. Historically, military regimes are not always friendly to religious pluralism — though in Niger, the coup leaders appointed a Christian to the government. Overthrows have a long history on the continent, but their recent resurgence indicates a broader democratic backsliding — a worrisome trend for religious communities.

As they have in previous years, the fractures in governance and security provided room for jihadist activities in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Nigeria but also Somalia, Mozambique, and other countries across the region. Human Rights Watch, for one, [documented](#)⁴ “widespread killings, rapes, and lootings of villages in northeast Mali” by jihadist militants since January 2023.

The most pronounced proliferation of groups affiliated with the Islamic State group and al-Qaeda is in Sub-Saharan Africa. The eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), for example, has become a safe haven for the Islamic Allied Democratic Forces group, which has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group. The ADF has been trying to destabilize Uganda and has been targeting churches and Christians in northeastern Congo for several years. In January 2023, ADF militants detonated a bomb at a church service in the border town of Kasindi (eastern DRC), killing at least 12 and injuring dozens more.

³ <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/reports/africa-recent-uptake-in-military-coups>

⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/13/mali-mounting-islamist-armed-group-killings-rape>

In Nigeria, thousands of members of the militant, though still active, Boko Haram group have laid down their weapons. The group is now by far overshadowed by ISWAP (Islamic State West African Province) which continues to menace Nigeria's northeast and many other parts of the country. Elsewhere, raids on predominantly Christian communities, killings, abductions, sexual violence and destruction of livelihoods continue, much of it at the hands of Fulani militants. All of this violence [affects Christians disproportionately](#)⁵.

An example of the regular surges of violence in Nigeria is the series of attacks on Christian communities in Plateau State in the period 17 April – 10 July 2023. In which the number of Christians killed was 315, with 31 Muslims killed, according to a [report by the Para-Mallam Peace Foundation](#)⁶. The resulting weeks of attacks affected no less than 6,603 households; there were 18,751 people displaced, nearly all of them Christians, among them 6,066 orphans between the ages of 0-5 years. These IDPs were temporarily housed in 14 camps hosted by the Church of Christ in Nations Local Church Councils (COCIN-LCC).

Even when they are not specifically targeted for religious reasons, however, Christians throughout Sub-Saharan Africa are extra vulnerable within the region's broader conflicts, such as those in Ethiopia, Sudan and Cameroon. Christians are soft targets that can be attacked with virtual impunity. This "persecution by convenience" severely restricts their future prospects and also those of their families and future generations.

2. Foreign influence in Sub-Saharan Africa squeezes Christian life

Authoritarian regimes in the region have found China and Russia to be willing partners.

China's increasing role in Africa — in infrastructure, technology, training — is enabling and strengthening autocratic regimes on the continent. Companies like Huawei are making massive inroads into African markets. African governments are spending \$1 billion per year on surveillance technologies, according to the UK-based Institute of Development Studies. The biggest customer is Africa's most populous country, Nigeria — both the federal government and individual states within the country. Europe and the United States have been willing sellers of such technology, too, the report notes, but their African market share has been giving way to China.

China's government, meanwhile, has chosen Africa as its first market for direct export of its authoritarian governance model. At a new campus in Tanzania, the Chinese Communist Party has opened its first overseas academy devoted to training political leaders in Beijing's fusion of one-party rule with economic and social planning. Political parties from six African countries made up the academy's first cadre.

⁵ <https://orfa.africa/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/230901-ORFA-Killings-and-Abductions-in-Nigeria-2019-2022.pdf>

⁶ <https://paramallampeacefoundation.org/2023/07/mangu-killings-its-time-for-peace-and-calling-for-an-end-to-the-unjust-killings-in-plateau-state-nigeria/>

Foreign influence in Africa during the World Watch List reporting period also came from Russia — more specifically, from the Wagner Group, a private military contractor widely assumed to have deep connections with the Russian government. The outfit had been increasingly active in various African nations including Burkina Faso, Mali, Central African Republic, Mozambique and Madagascar. Known for its ruthless tactics for putting down extremist activity, including cruelty toward civilians, Wagner has been gaining a foothold in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Wagner has emerged as one of the most feared entities in the Sahel region, particularly in Burkina Faso, Mali, and other nations where their presence has been or continues to be felt. Their influence has significantly stifled the civic space for Christians. Speaking out against governmental injustices or the brutalities perpetrated by Wagner has become an arduous task. Researchers in Burkina Faso and Mali note the near-impossibility, and at times life-threatening nature, of documenting the atrocities committed by this group. While the collective desire to combat terrorist groups is evident, Wagner views civilians as expendable entities, complicating the situation further. Geopolitical complexities add layers of difficulty, especially for Christians, particularly Protestants, who fear repercussions for being associated with Western opposition to Wagner's actions. The threat posed by Wagner extends beyond mere human rights violations, as their manipulation of vital economic sectors, notably mining, leaves African nations vulnerable to increased chaos and instability.

3. Violence in India rises sharply as elections approach

Vast India, the most populous nation on earth, is a jumble of trends. The situation for Christians has been worsening rapidly in some parts of the country, and improving in others, so that when freedom of religion for Christians across the whole country is taken into account, the result is a score that increased by only one point. Beneath the total score, however, is evidence that for Christians, India is becoming more violent.

In 2022, the World Watch List counted 10 Indian Christians who had been killed because of their faith. On the 2023 list, the number was 17. On the 2024 list, it is 160.

Increases were detected in other categories that help comprise the violence score: The number of attacks on Christian churches, schools and other institutions reported in the 2022 list was 47; on the 2023 list, 67; and on the 2024 list, 2,228. Christian homes attacked: 91 on the 2022 list; 180 on the 2023 list, and nearly 5,900 on the 2024 list. Christian businesses attacked: 2, then 37, then 1,572.

Most dramatically, more than 62,000 Indian Christians were forced to leave their homes during the World Watch List 2024 reporting period. That was an exponential jump from 380 on the 2022 list and 834 on the 2023 list.

The epicenter of the surge in violence and displacement has been the northeastern state of Manipur, where hostilities between the majority Meitei and minority Kuki ethnic groups erupted in May 2023. Meitei advocacy for official tribal status was met with opposition from the predominantly Christian Kuki, who argued that bestowing official status on the Meitei would

empower the larger and mostly Hindu ethnic group to push into Kuki areas. In the violence that spilled out of the debate — much of it waged online and laced with hate speech directed toward Kuki — hundreds of churches, even those with Meiti congregations, were destroyed, scores of people killed, and tens of thousands driven from their homes.

A U.N. [statement](#)⁷ noted the horror of “images of gender-based violence targeting hundreds of women and girls of all ages, and predominantly of the Kuki ethnic minority. The alleged violence includes gang rape, parading women naked in the street, severe beatings causing death, and burning them alive or dead.”

Conditions in refugee camps in Manipur and neighboring Mizoram state have deteriorated; the U.N. has urged a more forceful humanitarian response; the Indian government has been slow to move; there are reports of anti-terrorism units abusing their mandate as a pretext for attacking minorities; and the entire situation has been drenched in a fog of online misinformation and communication blackouts.

The chaos in Manipur is playing out against the familiar backdrop of muscular Hindu nationalism that characterizes the national government and large segments of the country. Under the protective roof of the governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its leader, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the more radical Hindu nationalists view all Christians as alien to the nation, and do not shy away from using violence in pursuit of a purely Hindu India. Converts to Christianity from a Hindu background are constantly under pressure to return to Hinduism.

The 2024 World Watch List records evidence of this anti-Christian pressure in a steady rise in hostilities in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh states. In late 2022, for example, residents of a Chhattisgarh village issued an ultimatum to approximately 200 Christians from 70 families: renounce their faith, or leave. Those who protested were beaten. Also late in 2022, police in Uttar Pradesh arrested nine pastors for “conversion activities,” including one who was hosting a wedding reception for his daughter and son-in-law. Uttar Pradesh is one of 12 Indian states where forced religious conversion is illegal, which provides a legal pretext for such crackdowns on Christians, while equivalent charges against Hindus are rare.

Meanwhile, India’s Supreme Court is deliberating on whether the country’s “scheduled caste” category, the members of which are widely known as Dalits, should be broadened to include Muslims and Christians. It is a hugely sensitive cultural issue with the potential to trigger large-scale political unrest.

India’s 2024 general elections will only add anxiety. In its campaign to retain control of the national government, the BJP can be expected to manufacture religious conflict as political fuel.

⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/09/india-un-experts-alarmed-continuing-abuses-manipur>

4. Churches under unprecedented attack from governments, mobs and insurgents

Out of all the countries scoring 41 or more points in the WWL 2024 reporting period, the ten countries where the most churches were attacked were China, India, Nigeria, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Niger and Angola. Together the number of churches or other public Christian properties attacked or closed down in these countries was an astonishing 14,129 (out of a total of 14,766 for all 78 countries on the 2024 list) but researchers believe it could have been thousands more. China and India top the list with an estimated 10,000 and 2,228 church attacks/closures respectively.

By far the largest number of churches closed down can be seen in the so-called ‘house churches’ in China. This term in the Chinese context has often been misleading: Although ‘House churches’ initially began as small, unregistered house groups gathering for worship, many grew immensely, holding their meetings in public places like hotel facilities or rented office floors. These churches frequently had hundreds or even thousands of Christians attending every week. But that freedom is now over, due in part to the authorities taking advantage of measures enforced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. ‘House churches’ have now returned to their roots, splintered into a myriad of less visible house groups, many with little pastoral leadership and few resources. At the same time, many of the venues for state-approved churches (TSPM) are being forced to close down and merge with larger churches. Added to this government pressure, [new TSPM regulations](#)⁸ have come into force in 2023 which show (particularly visibly in Articles 27, 36, 39, 40) how the Communist Party is actually daring to redefine Christian priorities and values.

In contrast to China, the church attacks in India are perpetrated by aggressive mobs. An example is the violence which broke out on 4 May 2023 in the Churachandpur area of Imphal city in Manipur. [According to Archbishop Dominic Lupon of Imphal](#)⁹ (YouTube interview at 9:45-19:35 minutes), on 4 May 2023, 249 Meitei churches were destroyed within the first 36 hours, targeted not by Kukis (who are predominately Christian) but by Meitei Hindus and adherents of Sanamahism. According to Lupon, the Meitei mobs which targeted the churches were organized through the Arambol Tenggol and Meitei Leepun vigilante organizations. Most of the Kuki population were under severe attack by these same mobs during the first 36 hours and were fleeing their homes. Thus, it was radical elements within the Meiteis that were attacking their own (Meitei Christians) as well as attacking the Kukis.

In Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Niger, churches or public Christian properties are typically attacked by predominantly Islamic insurgents who raid or invade Christian communities. For the WWL 2024 reporting period a very conservative estimate of churches and public Christian properties attacked or abandoned in these countries was 950. In Nigeria alone the number was 750.

⁸ <https://bitterwinter.org/the-new-chinese-measures-for-religious-activity-venues-come-into-force-on-september-1-the-full-text/>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQSiCYalus4>

During attacks on communities, people often flee their aggressors; their houses, businesses, fields, churches and public Christian properties (e.g., cemeteries) are abandoned, if not destroyed. Their forced displacement may be temporary or long-term.

Table listing attacks on Christian communities in Nigeria in the WWL 2024 reporting period

Total number of attacks on Christian communities in Nigeria with Christians killed or abducted	1,099
Attacks on Christian communities with 5 or more Christians killed or abducted	323
Attacks on Christian communities with 10 or more Christians killed or abducted	157

Whatever the situation was, it means that for each incident with 5 or more Christian victims (see table above) at least 2 or 3 churches or public Christian properties were attacked or abandoned, even in small communities. The bigger the community, the higher the number. So, in the case of Nigeria, it was calculated that at least 750 churches and public properties were attacked during the reporting period.

Although much further down the list of countries where the greatest number of churches were attacked, what has been going on in Algeria is just as devastating. Of the 47 churches affiliated with the Église Protestante d'Algérie (the Protestant umbrella organization), only 4 remained open in 2023. Several independent churches have also ceased meeting. This state of affairs has emerged through the Algerian government stepping up its campaign of using a 2006 law to increase pressure on the indigenous Protestant church, by interrogating church leaders and charging them with "holding worship without permission" or similar offences. During these interrogations, several church leaders received verbal orders to close their churches. This is a new trend as in previous years churches received officially documented orders to close their churches, which could be contested in court. At least 18 Christians, both church leaders and other persons active in the church, have received (suspended) prison sentences. As a result of this government action, pressure has increased to such an extent that the few remaining churches will have to consider ceasing all visible activities in 2024. The space for Christian life in Algeria is clearly diminishing.

5. Christians are less and less at home in the Middle East and North Africa

More than a decade of civil war in Syria had already scattered and diminished the Christian presence in the country. The devastating earthquake in February 2023 made the precarious situation worse. By no means was Syria the only country where the squeeze on Christian life was so invasive; the increase of Algeria's score on the World Watch List was very sharp, and Tunisia went further down the authoritarian path. But the 7.8-magnitude quake that radiated out from Turkey focused the world's eyes on Syria.

Syria's score on the 2024 World Watch List rose 1 point, a modest increase but enough to push the country into the list's "Extreme Persecution" tier. Christians fleeing the war's multi-front violence and subsisting amid the collapsed economy have been easy targets of violence and Islamic pressure to retreat from public life.

Militant Islamic opponents of the Assad regime, such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Shām and elements of the Islamic State group, have demolished or taken over historical churches, whose leaders are vulnerable to attack or kidnapping. Christians in these areas who haven't been forcibly displaced from their homes have little scope for expressing their faith.

In government-controlled areas, meanwhile, the regime's attitude towards churches is determined by the Christian community to which they belong. Though all Christian churches feel pressure, historical churches — such as Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches — tend to enjoy more standing to defend their rights than Evangelical church groups such as Baptists and Pentecostals.

Christians have been caught in the persistent pockets of conflict and, in some cases, deliberately targeted. In Afrin, for example, Turkish-backed troops are reported to be targeting Kurdish Christians.

Then came the earthquake. As a result of the disaster, 9 out of 10 people who had already fled the war's violence at least once to live in displacement camps were displaced yet again, according to [Action for Humanity](#)¹⁰. The quake "not only destroyed more homes, schools and places for children to play, they also shattered any sense of safety for so many of the most vulnerable children and families," said the director of UNICEF. Christian children already had been particularly vulnerable to such a shock, as many Christian schools had been closed or damaged because of the war and children have had to attend government — meaning Islamic — schools.

To make matters worse, just weeks after the quake Hay'at Tahrir al-Shām attacked government forces, and elements of the Islamic State group launched attacks. Once again caught up in conflict, Christian families have begun a new wave of migration, convinced that they are not welcomed by their Muslim countrymen and that their native country is not theirs.

Bit by bit, Christian life in other parts of the Middle East likewise is becoming less tenable. In 2023 Turkey continued its years-long military incursions into northern Iraq, where most of Iraq's Christians live, to fight the Kurdistan Workers' Party. The fighting has prevented Christians, who had fled the violence, from returning to their villages.

Even the meager piece of political territory held by Iraqi Christians is increasingly contested. A paramilitary group of Christians that formed in 2014 to fight the Islamic State group invasion of northern Iraq has since morphed into a political operation known as the Babylon Movement, which now holds all 5 of the seats reserved for Christians in Iraq's 329-seat parliament. Presented as a local Christian force, Babylon has recruited largely from Shia Muslim communities, and has ties to Iraq's Shia political party, the paramilitary Badr Organization, and the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. It has since been accused of corruption and other unsavory practices, leading to the U.S. sanctioning its leader.

¹⁰ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/no-place-displacement-report-multiple-displacement-idps-northwest-syria-due-12-years-conflict-and-february-6ths-earthquakes>

At the core of the tension is the Iraqi president's withdrawal of the presidential decree recognizing Cardinal Louis Sako's role and authority, which prompted the bishop to move the patriarchal see from Baghdad to Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. Sako has claimed his uprooting is the work of the Babylon Movement's leader, Rayan al-Kildani, whom Sako says intends to claim ownership of church property and other assets. al-Kildani has dismissed the allegations.

The end result: more pressure upon an embattled Christian minority.

Adding to that pressure is a 2023 Iraqi election-reform law that gives victorious major political parties the power to allocate the few parliamentary seats reserved for ethnic and religious minorities. Church leaders of various denominations urged their church members to boycott the November 2023 parliamentary elections if the representation of Christians and the protection of their interests could not be guaranteed.

According to a country expert, pressure on Christians in Iraq increased during the past year after pages of the Quran were publicly burned in [Sweden](#)¹¹ in June 2023.

Pressure on Christians in Iraqi Kurdistan increased further as two Christians were accused of blasphemy after posting online messages on social media. One of them was sentenced to prison, the other had to leave the country for his safety while a case against him was pending. The two cases were widely publicized online, leading to incitement of hatred against Christians in the region.

In northern Africa, the Algerian government in 2023 stepped up its campaign to use a 2006 law to shut down churches affiliated with the EPA, or Église Protestante d'Algérie. It was a further diminishment of the space for Christian life in Algeria compared to previous years when already numerous churches were closed.

Libya climbed to the third position on the World Watch List. In May 2023, a major incident occurred in Libya in which several Christians of Muslim background were [arrested](#)¹² and two foreign Christians [deported](#)¹³. During the WWL 2024 reporting period, hundreds of migrants have been [arbitrarily arrested](#)¹⁴ by Libyan authorities, including Christians from Sub-Saharan Africa and Egypt. It is believed that several of them were also targeted because of their Christian faith. Reports over widespread human trafficking, (sexual) abuse, torture and extortion have been coming out of Libya for years now. Their faith makes Christian migrants extra vulnerable for such abuse, forcing most of them to keep their faith a strict secret.

Tunisia's World Watch List score continues to climb, lifted by President Kais Saied's continued drift into authoritarianism. After asserting emergency powers in 2021, Saied deposed the prime minister, dissolved parliament, sacked judges, then launched investigations into political opponents. In 2023 a key opposition leader was arrested, and Saied earned international rebuke with a speech, heavy with racial overtones, that accused Sub-Saharan Africans of bringing

¹¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/20/outcry-over-quran-burning-in-sweden-a-timeline>

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/may/03/six-libyans-face-death-penalty-for-converting-to-christianity>

¹³ <https://libyaupdate.com/two-americans-arrested-in-libya-for-christian-proselytizing-deported/>

¹⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/un-says-concerned-over-libya-migrant-arrests-2023-06-12/>

"criminality and violence" to Tunisia. The resulting popular fury fell heavily upon Sub-Saharan African Christians in Tunisia, many of whom lost their jobs, while others fled the country.

Even in Lebanon, where Christians comprise a greater share of the population than in any other Middle Eastern country, and far removed from the top 50 countries on the World Watch List, Christians are witnessing a decline in privileges and influence in national life. Attacks on churches and Christian properties are increasing. Combined with the deteriorating economy, the situation has many Christians thinking about leaving their country.

6. Nicaragua deteriorates rapidly

The story in Latin America, increasingly, is Nicaragua. No. 50 on the World Watch List a year ago, it has moved up 20 spots to sit at No. 30. Nicaragua's score rose more than 5 points, which was an increase of 8.3%, the fastest rise in Latin America and one of the fastest among all WWL countries.

Cuba has become Latin America's top-ranked World Watch List country — evidence that, along with the example of Nicaragua, communist dictatorships in the region are intensifying their campaigns against Christian freedom. It is in Nicaragua, however, where persecution is on the quick march.

The rapid rise in Nicaragua's score is a product of the government's increasingly open hostility toward the Church. No longer indirect, the restrictions on religious freedom now are in full view, wrapped in legal frameworks tailor-made for the purpose. Critics of the government's repression of free expression, both clerical and secular, are arrested, as are their defenders. Universities and other institutions linked to the Church have their registrations cancelled. Christian-owned property and media outlets are seized. Catholic priests and bishops are accused of espionage; some have their citizenship stripped; nuns and other church representatives have been forced into exile. Some Christian celebrations in public spaces have been prohibited. The Nicaraguan government even shut down its embassy to the Holy See.

Perhaps the most notorious example of the government's pressure campaign began in the latter part of 2022 when it made a wide range of accusations against the bishop of Matagalpa, Rolando Álvarez, a vocal defender of civic freedoms in Nicaragua. The bishop was stripped of his citizenship and, after refusing exile to the U.S., was sentenced in February 2023 to more than 26 years in prison. The magistrate who read out the sentence on national TV said that the bishop was "considered [a traitor to the country](https://www.catholicnews-world.com/2023/02/breakingnews-catholic-bishop-rolando.html)¹⁵ and guilty, as a co-perpetrator, of the crimes of undermining national integrity, propagation of false news through information and communication technologies, obstruction of functions, aggravated disobedience or contempt of authority, all committed in real competition and to the detriment of Nicaraguan society and the State of Nicaragua."

¹⁵ <https://www.catholicnews-world.com/2023/02/breakingnews-catholic-bishop-rolando.html>

Global condemnation has rained down upon Álvarez' conviction, his detention in Nicaragua's notorious Modelo penitentiary, and the regime's assaults on religious freedom generally and the Catholic Church specifically. The European Union has issued a formal denunciation, while the U.S. State Department [placed visa restrictions](#)¹⁶ on complicit Nicaraguan government officials. The Permanent Council of the Organization of American States [charged](#)¹⁷ that Ortega has turned Nicaragua's back on its previous commitments to international covenants upholding "freedom of thought and expression, freedom of conscience, religion or belief." And in September, the U.N. Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua [said](#)¹⁸ that the widespread human rights violations occurring in the country amount to crimes against humanity.

Nicaragua's repression of the Church fit into the Ortega regime's increasingly autocratic rule since election in 2006, and especially since the government's crackdown on the attempted 2018 pro-democracy movement. The government's aim is not simply to silence the voice of Christians but, given their influence in the country, to hinder their credibility and stop their message from spreading. In that way, Nicaragua is not setting the trend with its quick rise on the World Watch List so much as it is falling into step with single-party, communist Cuba.

7. North Korea re-establishes its hold on No. 1

For 20 years the DPRK had held the No. 1 spot on the World Watch List, ranking as the single most difficult country to live the Christian faith. Then in the 2022 list it slipped to No. 2, just behind Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban takeover during the summer of 2021.

In the 2023 World watch List reporting period, after all Christians who could had left the country and the worst of the religiously motivated violence in Afghanistan had abated — though by no means ceased — North Korea moved back to the top of the list. This year, with North Korea once again at No. 1, the familiar annual pattern has re-established itself.

Also familiar, here on the Pacific Rim as on the African continent, is the influence of China. In the weeks following Pyongyang's August announcement that it would begin to re-open the border with its western neighbor, China has sent hundreds of North Korean refugees back to their native country, according to Human Rights Watch.

The organization [has reported](#)¹⁹ that Chinese authorities forcibly repatriated 80 North Koreans in August, and 40 more in September. Then, in early October — just after the 12-month World Watch List data-collection period had concluded for purposes of the 2024 list — China dispatched five waves of convoys across the border into North Korea, Human Rights Watch said, basing its report on the testimony of "an underground missionary from South Korea with extensive contacts in North Korea and China." In all, the agency said, the number of North Korean refugees returned to their homeland could be as many as 600. The South Korean govern-

¹⁶ <https://www.state.gov/promoting-accountability-for-the-ortega-murillo-regime-for-restricting-freedoms/>

¹⁷ <https://usoas.usmission.gov/permanent-council-pronounces-itself-over-developments-in-nicaragua/>

¹⁸ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/09/group-experts-nicaragua-finds-escalating-persecution-against-dissent-and-crackdown>

¹⁹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/12/china-forcibly-returns-more-500-north-korea>

ment [confirmed](#)²⁰ the mass repatriation but did not specify the number of refugees involved.

International law forbids forced repatriation. Human Rights Watch said “the returnees, mostly women, are at grave risk of being detained in forced labor camps, and face torture, sexual violence, enforced disappearance, and execution.”

It’s unknown how many of the repatriated North Koreans are Christians, though of course the regime’s zero-tolerance policy toward believers has always been a powerful motivator for Christians to risk the dangers of trying to leave. Attempted border crossings had become less common, however, after the government closed the border with China in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In all five spheres of Christian life measured by the World Watch List, the pressure upon North Korean Christians is at the highest level; the score in all categories except violence is at the maximum. Those who follow the World Watch List know Pyongyang’s smothering squeeze on religious faith is as constant as the earth’s rotation. What proves remarkable are the shoots of faith that continue to pierce through the unrelenting oppression. For example, an April 2023 Radio Free Asia [news account](#)²¹, about the arrest of five family members who had gathered for prayer, was noteworthy not so much for the ordinary facts of the incident, but mostly because it was publicly reported so swiftly.

8. A few rays of light

The deteriorating situation for Christian life in Mali is documented in this summary. Still, it is worth noting that in June 2023, Malian voters approved a referendum on the adoption of a new constitution, a move seen as one that could pave the way for the return to civilian rule, and the holding of new elections in 2024. The military government pledged to work toward a return to civilian rule after the Economic Community of West African States lifted a set of trade and financial sanctions. In the new constitution there is clear recognition of the Christian minority in the country.

In the midst of India’s many pressures upon Christian life, a bit of relief: The Congress Party dislodged the Hindu-nationalist BJP after spring 2023 elections in Karnataka state. According to the Hindustan Times, the new Congress-led government intends to initiate a so-called “de-saffronization drive.” New State Minister Priyank Kharge was quoted as saying “many orders and laws enforced under the previous BJP regime such as school textbook revisions and anti-conversion laws were against state interest and will be revised or withdrawn.”

Sri Lanka’s score rose 3 points to place it at No. 58 on the World Watch List. Yet Open Doors partners continue to report success in educating pastors to stand up for their constitutional rights, which has prevented church closures in some cases.

²⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67098453>

²¹ <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/church-05262023115519.html>

And in Laos, whose score increase was one of the greatest on the 2024 World Watch List, there was this report from a country expert: “In all my years working as a researcher, I never saw a clearer connection of a growing church with growing opposition, resulting in higher scores,” the researcher said. “I find it comforting that the biblical verses predicting this connection are still true.”