

Persecution in World's Two Most-Populous Countries Escalates to Troubling Levels

Global Org Releases Annual List of Worst Religious Persecution Offenders

WASHINGTON, Jan. 16, 2019—The 2019 Open Doors World Watch List reveals disturbing revelations for the world's two most populous countries—India and China—which have seen a dramatic increase in the persecution against Christians. As they are each home to more than a billion people, even an incremental rise in persecution has an outsized, exponential impact in these countries. China jumps a shocking 16 spots on the Open Doors World Watch List from No. 43 to No. 27, while India enters the top 10 list for the first time. Russia, which last appeared on the list in 2011, enters at No. 41. *(Note: An additional news release detailing Russia will be sent on Jan. 17.)*

In India, Hindu nationalists fueled a crackdown on Christians and churches, promoting the widespread oppression of religious minorities. The situation has deteriorated rapidly in the last several years, as non-Hindus are increasingly regarded as outsiders in their own country. In some areas, this has translated to brutal violence against Hindus who have converted to Christianity. The situation in India is volatile, and religious minorities in particular face extremely dangerous situations with mobs of violence breaking out and demanding death sentences.

China's dramatic rise in 16 spots from last year's ranking is one of the highest jumps on the list. The heightened power of the Chinese government is being wielded to remove any challenges to the absolute authority of President Xi Jinping, even if those challenges are related to personal faith in a god other than the State. New regulations and government crackdowns have made open worship for unregistered churches increasingly risky, particularly in certain regions of the country. Pastor Wang Yi's recent arrest along with some 150 Christians is a recent indicator of the expanding level of control and religious persecution.

In its 27th year, the list—which is the world's definitive assessment of religious persecution based upon in-depth, rigorous analysis of on-the-ground, first-person research—remains a global indicator of where human and religious rights are being violated, and those countries most vulnerable to societal unrest and destabilization.

Overarching Trends of Persecution Against Christians Globally

Across the 50 countries on the Open Doors World Watch List, it is estimated that more than **245 million Christians now experience high, very high or extreme persecution, an increase from 215 million in 2018.**

During the reporting period for this study, in the top 50 countries on the World Watch List, 4,136 Christians were killed for faith-related reasons; 2,625 Christians were detained without trial, arrested, sentenced and/or imprisoned; and 1,266 churches and other Christian buildings were attacked—an increase in all three areas from last year.

Overall religious persecution against Christians has increased as the threshold was higher for a country to make the list. Using a proprietary, 100-point assessment scale and newly improved research methods, investigators uncovered an alarming rise in countries scoring 41 points or higher that still did not rank among the top 50 worst nations. (Points are given for each incident of persecution, and the total points provide the ranking for each country.) Twenty-three countries—compared to just eight last year—had this dubious distinction, with the majority (13) of these countries in sub-Saharan Africa, a reflection of the

deteriorating situation for Christians in that region, where radical Islamic militant groups operate with near-impunity.

This year's Open Doors World Watch List does, however, contain some good news, including in Iraq and Malaysia, which showed the most significant improvements compared to last year's report. Iraq, which saw a decrease in persecution around private, family, community, national and community life mostly due to the territorial defeat of ISIS, moved from No. 8 to No. 13. Recently Iraq also declared Christmas a national holiday. Malaysia—which saw an unprecedented 2018 election victory by the Pakatan Harapan, the country's federal opposition prior to the election, that raised hope among minorities—moved from No. 23 to No. 42.

“Open Doors continues to see ominous persecution trends against Christians,” said David Curry, president and CEO of Open Doors USA. *“Islamic radicalism continues to dominate and influence all spheres of life for Christians, and we are watching China and India very closely. The distressing impact of billions of people living in an environment in which the government oppresses freedom of religion is unraveling day by day as millions of Christians are being attacked, imprisoned or killed. Open Doors will continue to walk alongside these Christians and advocate on their behalf for human rights we take for granted in America.”*

Quick Facts

- One in every nine Christians in the world experiences high levels of persecution for their faith.
- One in every six African Christians experiences high levels of persecution for their faith.
- One in every three Asian Christians experiences high levels of persecution for their faith.
- North Korea tops the list for the 18th year in a row.
- Algeria had the highest year-over-year increase in persecution against Christians.
- Russian Federation and Morocco are newcomers to this year's list.
- Islamic oppression fuels persecution in eight of the top ten countries on the 2019 Open Doors World Watch List.
- Bahrain and Djibouti fell out of the top 50.
- Pakistan and Nigeria had the most violence recorded against Christians, with Central Africa Republic close behind.
- Iraq and Malaysia showed the most significant improvement since last year.

Top 10

1. North Korea
2. Afghanistan
3. Somalia
4. Libya
5. Pakistan
6. Sudan
7. Eritrea
8. Yemen
9. Iran
10. India

Persecution at a Glance

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Media Resources

- Interview David Curry, president and CEO of Open Doors USA
- Interview persecuted Christians from India, Iraq, Nigeria and South Asia
- View the complete 2019 Open Doors World Watch List
- View all news releases including upcoming ones around Russia, Africa, Asia and the Middle East
- View photos
- Listen to audio of the news conference (to be posted online soon)

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Women Face Twice as Many Types of Persecution as Men

Double Persecution for Being Female and Christian Leaves Many Women More Vulnerable

WASHINGTON, Jan. 16, 2019—According to Open Doors researchers on the ground in some of the world’s most dangerous countries for Christians, Christian women around the world are facing harsh and targeted persecution based on their gender. The latest report indicates that Christian women experience a “double persecution” in 33 countries—persecution for being a Christian and persecution for being a woman.

Far from being gender-blind, persecution exploits all available vulnerabilities women have including lack of education, lack of healthcare, forced divorce, travel bans, trafficking, widowhood, incarceration in a psychiatric unit, forced abortions or contraception, being denied access to work and lack of choice to marry a person of similar faith. **The pressures faced by Christian women are twice as numerous as those experienced by Christian men.** Whatever form it takes, one of the goals of all gender-specific persecution found in the report is to destroy the Christian community.

For instance, the sexual assault of women in Nigeria by Boko Haram, and in Iraq by Islamic State, is typically acknowledged as rape, but not framed in the public dialogue as a tool of religious persecution. While those assaults have not been confined to Christian populations, a study of the demographics of victims and of their testimonies of the words used by attackers leaves no doubt that at least one primary objective of Boko Haram and the Islamic State is to eradicate the Christian population by any means.

Christian men and women experience persecution in very different ways. In fact, no overlap exists between the three most prevalent ways Christian men and women experience pressure to abandon their faith. Christian men are most often subject to pressures related to work, military/militia conscription and nonsexual physical violence, whereas Christian women are specifically and most frequently targeted through forced marriage, rape and other forms of sexual violence. Notably, women face *more* physical violence than men in terms of the quantity and variety of forms violence can take.

“Women face an incredible challenge of living as second-class citizens in many countries. To further complicate and degrade their value, Christian women specifically face an even greater challenge. They are targeted specifically for their faith and often are helpless to demand justice,” said David Curry, president and CEO of Open Doors USA. *“As the United States continues to focus on improving the lives of American women, let us not forget those who cannot even have a man arrested for violence against them.”*

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Media Resources

- Interviews with David Curry, president and CEO of Open Doors USA
- Interviews with persecuted female Christians from India and South Asia
- [Full report on gender persecution](#)

Methodology

Nov. 1, 2016, to Oct. 31, 2017, researchers measured the degree of freedom a Christian woman has to live out her faith in five spheres of life—private, family, community, national and church, plus a sixth category measuring the degree of violence. View more information on the methodology of this report [here](#).

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Russia Among ‘Most Dangerous’ Places for Christians Per Open Doors World Watch List

WASHINGTON, Jan. 16, 2019—For the first time since 2011, the Russian Federation joins murderous nations like North Korea and Iran on the 2019 Open Doors World Watch List—the only comprehensive annual ranking of the 50 countries most dangerous for Christians.

This startling regression is due in no small part to legislation squelching proselytization and basic religious freedoms in the country and in Russian-occupied areas for Protestants and Evangelicals, as the country favors the Russian Orthodox Church.

Media Resources: Full press release and details on 2019 Open Doors World Watch List, including a full profile on persecution of Christians in Russia.

With more than 81 percent of Russia’s 144 million residents considering themselves Christian, this uptick in adverse actions against Christians may at first seem counterintuitive. The next biggest religious group in Russia is Muslims—mostly Sunnis. Even though they only make up 12.2 percent of the population, most of the persecution of Christians in Russia comes from the Muslim environment. Among the more conservative Muslims living in Russia’s Northern Caucasus region, a strong, radical Islamic culture exerts enormous adverse pressure and violent outbursts against Christians who have converted from a Muslim background. In many parts of this region, Islam is the dominant religion, and Christians are the minority.

Though radical Islam is largely to blame for Russia’s poor standing in how Christians are treated within its borders, the Russian legislation is unfairly applied to non-Russian Orthodox Christians as new laws and restrictions are constantly being imposed. Russian Orthodox churches experience fewer problems with the government, whereas unregistered churches active in evangelism may face obstructions in the form of surveillance and interrogation. The Russian Orthodox Church often considers Protestant groups as sects who are teaching heresy. The state often regards these groups as un-Russian, Western spies.

Since 2012, the Russian Duma has passed a number of laws that impose restrictions on society, including religion. For example, Russia’s Supreme Court declared the Jehovah Witness national headquarters and all local organizations to be extremists, banning all activity and ordering its property be seized by the state. In response, the Russia Catholic Church condemned the ban and said the ruling was a threat to religious freedom. In stark contrast, the Russian Orthodox Church agreed with the ruling.

Though the impetus for these laws is usually political or to curb extremism, local authorities in Russia have a reputation of using secular legislation to restrict non-Russian Orthodox Christian activities. The government’s approach—and the interpretation of that approach at the local level—to non-Orthodox churches has begun to adversely affect Christians in many ways, such as:

- A so-called “anti-missionary” amendment that has been used to punish churches
- An immigration law, which has been used to target and expel expatriates who used social media to share evangelical messages
- Unregistered churches active in evangelism facing obstructions of surveillance and interrogation

As the country’s ties to Western countries are becoming more strained, the Russian Federation may become increasingly isolated. This will particularly affect those Christians who belong to denominations regarded as Western.

“Today’s Russia is certainly lightyears better for Christians than the days behind the Iron Curtain,” said David Curry, president and CEO of Open Doors USA. *“Yet for non-Russian Orthodox Christians in Russia, every move by the government to squelch religious freedom is another step toward making Russia an increasingly difficult place to live, especially for those Christians who are also already experiencing aggression in areas dominated by Islam.”*

Persecution in Russia Summarized

- **Islamic oppression:** Islamic militants are fighting against the Russian army to establish a Muslim emirate in the Caucasus region. Islam is also becoming increasingly influential in Tatarstan and threatening church life.
- **Dictatorial paranoia:** Though Russia has a parliament (with elections), it is completely dominated by the United Russia party of President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. The government is constantly restricting existing legislation and imposing new restrictions. This results in policies that favor the Russian Orthodox Church at the expense of other Christian groups.
- **Denominational protectionism:** Outreach activities by non-Orthodox denominations are looked upon with suspicion. These Christian groups are regarded as being alien to Russia.

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Persecution at a Glance

Christians remain one of the most persecuted religious groups in the world. While persecution of Christians takes many forms, it is defined as any hostility experienced as a result of identification with Christ. Christians throughout the world continue to risk imprisonment, loss of home and assets, torture, beheadings, rape, and even death, as a result of their faith.

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One in Every Three Christian Asians Experiences High Persecution

Annual Watch List Exposes Worst Religious-Persecution Offenders

WASHINGTON, Jan. 16, 2019—The 2019 Open Doors World Watch List reveals new persecution numbers for Christian Asians. With an increase in religious persecution, the research reports that one in every three Christian Asians experiences high persecution due to their faith. This is an increase from last year's data in which one in every four Christians experienced high persecution. More than 403 million Asians consider themselves to be Christians. Overall, Open Doors World Watch List estimates that over **245 million Christians now experience high, very high or extreme persecution, an increase from 215 million in 2018.**

North Korea continues to be the top of the list for the 18th year in a row since 2002.

Pakistan continues to be one of the most violent countries for a Christian. With the acquittal of Asia Bibi, days of mass protest and disruption erupted across Pakistan as radical Islamic groups demanded for the judges who ruled in favor of Bibi and for Bibi herself to be killed. Even with the acquittal and her freedom, Bibi still fears for her life and is unable to leave Pakistan to seek asylum in a safe country.

The situation in India continues to rise as the country enters the top 10 list for the first time. Hindu nationalists fueled a crackdown on Christians and churches, while promoting the widespread oppression of religious minorities. The situation has deteriorated rapidly in the last several years, as non-Hindus are increasingly regarded as outsiders in their own country. In some areas, this has translated to brutal violence against Hindus who have converted to Christianity. The situation in India is volatile and religious minorities in particular face extremely dangerous situations, with mobs of violence breaking out and demanding death sentences.

China's dramatic rise 16 spots from last year's ranking is one of the highest jumps on the list—from No. 43 in 2018 to No. 27 in 2019. The heightened power of the Chinese government is being wielded to remove any challenges to the absolute authority of President Xi Jinping, even if those challenges are related to personal faith in a god other than the State. New regulations and government crackdowns have made open worship for unregistered churches increasingly risky, particularly in certain regions of the country. Pastor Wang Yi's recent arrest, along with some 150 Christians, is a recent indicator of the expanding level of control and religious persecution.

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“Open Doors continues to see ominous persecution trends against Christians,” said David Curry, president and CEO of Open Doors USA. *“We are watching China and India very closely. The distressing impact of billions of people living in an environment in which the government oppresses freedom of religion is unraveling day by day as millions of Christians are being attacked, imprisoned or killed. Open Doors will continue to walk alongside these Christians and advocate on their behalf for human rights we take for granted in America.”*

-more-

Top 10

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One in Every Six Christian Africans Experiences High Persecution

Annual Watch List Exposes Worst Religious-Persecution Offenders

WASHINGTON, Jan. 16, 2019—The 2019 Open Doors World Watch List reveals new persecution numbers for Christian Africans. With an increase in religious persecution, the research reports that one in every six African Christians experiences high persecution due to their faith. This is an increase from last year's data, in which one in every eight Christians experienced high persecution. More than 631 Africans consider themselves to be Christians. Overall, Open Doors World Watch List estimates that over **245 million Christians now experience high, very high or extreme persecution, an increase from 215 million in 2018.**

Islamic oppression fuels persecution in eight of the top 10 countries on the 2019 Open Doors World Watch List. While the violence from Islamic State and other Islamic militants has mostly disappeared from the Middle East, their loss of territory there means that fighters have dispersed to a larger number of countries not only in the region, but, increasingly, into sub-Saharan Africa. Their radical ideology has inspired, or infiltrated, numerous splinter groups such as Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), a deadly group that broke away from Nigeria's Boko Haram, and that also enslaves Christian women and girls as an integral part of their strategy.

Sub-Saharan Africa poses one of the world's most potent security challenges, as weak governance, poverty and radical Islam increasingly collide. Instability, corruption, poverty, unemployment and lack of governance feed into Christian persecution, because states either are ineffective or sometimes actively conspire due to ethnic, tribal or political affiliations. The effect of the ensuing accumulation of structural vulnerabilities is also borne out in distinct patterns of persecution for men and women of the region.

Almost 30 violent Islamist groups are known to be active in the African region, and most perpetrate violence in more than one country. Some of them continue to hold expatriate Christian aid workers as hostages in Mali, Burkina Faso and other countries. Nigeria's Boko Haram shows the fluidity of violence across the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, instigating attacks in four countries. The potent mix of radical Islam layered on top of regional and local conflicts means that Christian Africans continue to die in north-east Kenya (No. 40), the Central African Republic (No. 21), and north and central Nigeria (No. 12).

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“The situation in Africa continues to be one of the more intense and volatile regions for Christians,” said David Curry, president and CEO of Open Doors USA. *“Weak governments and an inability or want to help provide stability for all African peoples have only heightened the risk for Christians who continue to be targets of mass killings, beatings and kidnappings.”*

-more-

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Egyptian Copts Remain Targets for Islamic Extremists

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 16, 2019—The 2019 Open Doors World Watch List is sounding an alarm for Egypt, even as violent excesses of Islamic State and other Islamic militants have mostly disappeared from headlines. Since 2017, Islamic militants have gained strength in Egypt, where they continue to recruit and capture pockets of territory, landing Egypt at No. 16 on the 2019 Open Doors World Watch List.

Egypt has the Middle East's largest population of Christians who are Copts. The Islamic State continues to threaten to wipe out Copts—who make up approximately 10 percent of the 100 million population in the Middle East—by terrorizing them with targeted murders of respected leaders, such as doctors. Other Islamic groups have also targeted Copts with bombings of churches and killing a bus full of pilgrims. Despite Copts' pleas for protection, the government has given little response, even with the conviction of some killers and attackers.

"Egypt remains a hotbed for Islamic extremists to target and attempt to destroy the Christian community," said David Curry, president and CEO of Open Doors USA. *"We must continue to be vigilant in advocating for Christians in the Middle East who have limited religious freedom rights."*

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