

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2020

Key partners report on the pressures they are likely to face in 2020



Military parade in North Korea.



AFRICA

NIGERIA

'In 2020 Christians are likely to suffer continuing attacks by Fulani herdsmen militia in the Middle Belt region and Boko Haram Islamic terrorist group attacks in the north-east,' reports Paul, who works with Release partner Ben Kwashi, the Archbishop of Jos.

'Persecution is increasing and most of it is not reported due to government intimidation because the government and security forces want to prove that they are in control and winning the war against terrorism,' he said.

'Meanwhile thousands of Christians have been displaced by Fulani herdsmen in Plateau state – and their homes taken over. Some have been living in camps for up to five years!'

He added: *'The killings by Fulani herdsmen will most certainly continue in 2020 because there is no will by the*

government to stop the land-grabbing, nor to return displaced Christians to their homelands and provide security.

'Boko Haram still controls many communities which include a large number of Christians.

'So attacks by them will continue since this radical Islamic sect is still very active,' added Paul.

ERITREA

More than 600 evangelical Christians remain detained without trial inside repressive Eritrea where all evangelical and pentecostal churches were banned in 2002. At least 170 believers have suffered more than ten years in jail in appalling conditions – despite appeals for their release by the international community. In the coming year, repression, forced conscription and economic crisis will force many Eritreans to flee as refugees.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians

EASTERN ASIA



CHINA

'The persecution of Christians in China has been rising since 2018, when China imposed tough new religious restrictions,' says Release CEO Paul Robinson.

'Freedom of faith is guaranteed under Article 36 of the Chinese constitution. But in practice, the authorities bulldoze churches, tear down crosses and imprison pastors. Lawyers who speak up for them in the courts simply disappear. And it's getting worse.'

'It used to be just the unofficial churches that were targeted, but today China is

pulling down state-registered churches and persecuting their pastors too.'

The authorities have banned Christians from holding prayer meetings in their homes. Hosts risk having their houses demolished or taken from them. China has also banned Christians from sharing religious messages with anyone under the age of 18.

Authorities are even installing face-recognition cameras in churches to spy on congregations and preachers – ensuring that persecution will continue in 2020.



NORTH KOREA

'The zero-tolerance policy of the government means that Christianity is incompatible with life and citizenship in North Korea,' said Dr Eric Foley, CEO of our associate ministry Voice of the Martyrs Korea.

'Any North Korean suspected even of having contact with a foreign missionary, such as from China, would

be interned at a concentration camp, along with family members extending to three generations.'

'The policy against Christians has remained steady since at least the 1950s – and is arguably the longest, harshest persecution of Christians in recorded history.'

For these reasons, Christians inside North Korea will continue to experience severe repression in 2020.

'Even so, the North Korean underground church is believed to be growing at a faster rate than the church in the UK or almost anywhere in the West,' said Dr Foley.

SOUTH ASIA



AFGHANISTAN

It is dangerous for an Afghan citizen to convert to Christianity – ensuring that Christians will continue to face extreme pressure from both the authorities and militants in the next 12 months.

Despite these pressures one partner told us: *'We are grateful that together we can be part of seeing God build His church among the Afghan people.'*

INDIA

Following the landslide victory of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) in May 2019, Christians and other minorities fear that Hindu nationalism and



China is building a vast surveillance system to monitor citizens, including Christians meeting in churches.



Narendra Modi

religious intolerance will continue to grow during 2020.

Hindu extremists attacked churches and individual believers throughout 2019, and this is likely to continue in 2020. Since the BJP took power in 2014, there has been a significant rise in the number of attacks against Christians.

According to the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), Christians endured 218 incidents of religiously motivated violence during the first ten months of 2019 – the majority of these allegedly by vigilante mobs. In 2014, 147 incidents of religiously motivated violence against Christians were documented.

PAKISTAN

'Christians in Pakistan are a marginalised community and deprived of equal rights,' said one Release partner. *'They are facing discrimination at all levels, and in all walks of life, on a daily basis.'*

'The blasphemy laws continue to be widely misused against Christians – often to settle personal scores,' he added.

'Christian girls have been kidnapped, raped, converted to Islam and forced to marry their abductors. The issue of the forced conversion of Christian and Hindu women has surfaced time and again in the national media – but there has been no serious effort to address the issue by any ruling government.'

Given these trends, Christians in Pakistan will continue to face persecution and discrimination in 2020.

SRI LANKA

Religious and ethnic minorities have been concerned since Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary from 2005 to 2015, was elected president in November 2019.

'We knew right from the beginning that the Sinhala Buddhists of this country will be behind my victory,' said Rajapaksa.

The Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), an extreme Buddhist nationalist group, allegedly enjoyed the protection of his brother's previous regime. Thus minorities, including Christians, fear that attacks by such extremists will grow in the coming year.

SOUTH-EAST ASIA



MALAYSIA

While Malaysia's constitution guarantees religious freedom, Sharia (Islamic law) often supersedes it. It is illegal to evangelise Malays, and apostasy laws make conversion illegal in all but one Malaysian state.

As a result, *'many believers from a Muslim background are in hiding,'* says one Release partner. Churches have been monitored by the government.

'The underground church has increased and your prayers have helped us to have the courage to continue – despite the fear some have felt,' added our partner.

In these circumstances, Christian converts in Malaysia will continue to face discrimination in 2020.

CENTRAL ASIA

'Throughout Central Asia, Christians are under pressure from both government and society,' said one Release partner. *'In many states in the region, believers have no opportunity to share their faith publicly, and authorities often oppose the registration of new churches.'*

These policies reflect an increasingly aggressive attitude towards Christians by Muslim society, said our partner.

'The greatest aggression is manifested against those people who were previously Muslims, who accepted the gospel and became Christians. They are considered as traitors to their people and state. They are often openly called the agents of Western countries.'

'According to Russian media, which are very influential in countries of the former Soviet Union, evangelical leaders are seen as spies of the West, with America and Great Britain regarded as the main enemies.'

In such conditions, Christians in Central Asia will continue to face discrimination in the coming year.

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MIDDLE EAST



Thanks to your support, refugees in Kurdistan, northern Iraq, receive emergency aid.

EGYPT

Egypt is home to the fastest growing population in the Middle East and the largest Christian population in the Arab world: Christians number around 11 million people (13% of the population).

Despite protection offered by the constitution, the Christian minority in Egypt will continue to face discrimination and persecution during 2020. Most Christians live as second-class citizens.

Believers from a Muslim background face the harshest treatment, such as expulsion from their families, divorce instigated by their Muslim spouses, estrangement from their children and loss of employment.



IRAQ

While an estimated 1.8 million Christians lived in Iraq in the year 2000 – that number has dropped dramatically to around just 300,000 today.

‘They’ve been driven out by conflict and insecurity. And many more are now anxious to leave,’ said Release partner Jamal.

The death of Islamic State (IS) leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in October 2019, is unlikely to allay the Christian community’s growing fears. *‘If IS is finished today, then another movement with a different name is likely to replace it,’* said our partner.

In addition, the Turkish incursion into neighbouring Syria in October 2019 is likely to drive a new wave of refugees into Kurdistan in the north-east in the coming year.

Read more about Iraq on page 10.

IRAN

‘There is a campaign to stop the spread of Christianity, to arrest those who are leading house churches and those involved in evangelism and teaching,’ reports one Release partner.

‘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 only allow the Christian minority groups to operate.’

‘Christians are likely to face increasing pressures in 2020. The very fear of persecution is a worry as believers meeting in secret do not know if they are under surveillance or not. These pressures have led to a number of believers leaving Iran, mainly to Turkey – and this movement is likely to continue in 2020.’

See page 6 for more on Iran.

Release helps Christians in the UK and Ireland to actively engage with their persecuted brothers and sisters around the world: praying with them, standing with them, helping them, and learning lessons of true Christian discipleship with them.

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