

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2019

Key partners report on the pressures they are likely to face this year

Coptic Christians mourn following an attack by armed gunmen that left seven dead in November. Photo Reuters/Mohamed Abd El Ghany.

AFRICA



NIGERIA

Fulani militants are likely to continue their devastating attacks against Christian communities in northern and central Nigeria throughout 2019.

Our partner reported an escalation of attacks in 2018: with up to 6,000 people killed and 50,000 displaced in the first six months alone. *'The escalation in the killing is very clear,'* he said. *'There is a deliberate plan to destroy and take over the predominantly Christian communities in the region.'*

In addition the terrorist group Boko Haram has targeted everything and everyone it views as being outside 'true Islam'. This includes not only Christians, whom the group has labeled 'infidels', but also secular schools and moderate Muslims. Young girls are particularly vulnerable to abduction.

'The campaign by Islamic Fulani cattle

herdsmen and Boko Haram terrorists is a strategic scorch-earthed battle, a modern-day jihad against Christianity in the northern and Middle Belt regions of Nigeria,' said our partner.



ERITREA

An estimated 350 evangelical Christians remain detained without trial under the repressive regime of President Isaias Afewerki. All Evangelical and Pentecostal churches have been banned since 2002. More than 100 believers have suffered more than ten years in jail in appalling conditions. In 2019 many Eritreans will continue to flee to neighbouring countries as refugees.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians

EASTERN ASIA



CHINA

2018 witnessed a sharp increase in opposition to religion in China, including Christianity. Many churches can no longer have children or youth in any of their activities, reports our partner. In some areas unregistered (illegal) churches have voluntarily disbanded to meet in small groups of under 15 people in order to avoid attention from the authorities.

The government, under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, is actively aiming to control anything not in line with its beliefs and desires. This includes religion, social media, internet access and ideas from abroad. It is attempting to 'clean up' society so that Communist Party members, armed forces, police and even teachers do not hold or propagate religious beliefs.

'The government wants Christianity to be a very minor activity held by unimportant, older people,' said our partner. For these reasons persecution of unregistered churches will continue in 2019.



NORTH KOREA

North Korea remains the most repressive state on earth, with Christians being targeted for brutal treatment.

Our partner estimates that there are about 100,000 Christians in North Korea, with some 30,000 being held in concentration camps.

The so-called 'peace process' currently unfolding between North Korea, South Korea and the US has not resulted in either freedom or the expectation of freedom for Christians in the country. North Korea's meetings with other countries have focused largely on international diplomacy and economics.

As a result intense pressure on the underground church will continue in 2019.

'Be aware that the North Korean government is using its state churches to deceive Christians worldwide into funding its continued efforts to crush the North Korean underground church,' said our partner.

'We believe that the North Korean state churches will raise the claim that what their government and its state church oppose is not Christianity, but rather the captivity of Christianity to Western imperialism.'

'Pray for the global church, the UK church, and your own church to stand with underground North Korean Christians.'

SOUTH ASIA



AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan remains anti-Christian and it continues to be illegal for an Afghan to become a Christian in the country.

During 2019 members of the small Christian community are likely to face similar pressures as in 2018: economic problems with rampant inflation, corruption, drought, lack of jobs, as well as insecurity and violence, and a feeling of hopelessness that things will never improve.

'Believers don't fear persecution from government, but rather from the Taliban,' said our partner, who has a media ministry in the region.

'Pray for protection, spiritually, for our listeners, our staff, our technology - that the enemy will not be able to destroy the message of God's love and truth.'

'We are grateful that together we can be part of seeing God build His church among the Afghan people.'





Hindu militants take to the streets in Calcutta.

INDIA

Hindu nationalism has increased since Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) came to power in 2014. Hindu extremists in several states attacked churches and individual Christians in 2018 – and are likely to continue to do so throughout 2019 (see feature on page 6).

Persecution in 2018 included the following incidents:

- In November a Christian prayer meeting was attacked by a mob of more than 100 Hindu radicals in Santhoshnagar in Hubli city, in the southern state of Karnataka. Several Christians were injured.
- In October a mob of Hindu extremists attacked Pastor Hanumanth Rao while conducting a prayer meeting in a Christian home in Parupalli village, in the Mahabubnagar District of Telangana.

PAKISTAN

‘The battle for religious freedom in Pakistan is far from over,’ said Release’s CEO Paul Robinson when blasphemy-accused Asia Bibi was acquitted in October (see page 9).

The story of Asia highlights the plight of many Christians in Pakistan – not only those who have been accused of blasphemy. The culture of intolerance and persecution has been growing and attacks against Christians have risen.

Consequently believers face a ‘frightening climate,’ reports one Release partner.

‘Christians in Pakistan continue to risk imprisonment, loss of home and assets, torture, rape and even death as a result of their faith in Jesus.’

Another partner, CLAAS (Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement), stated: *‘Hate against them continues to grow and they are considered inferior to Muslims. They are poor*

and forced to do menial jobs. They are treated as third-class citizens.’

For these reasons persecution and discrimination against Christians will continue in 2019.

SRI LANKA

Extremist Buddhist monks are likely to continue to incite attacks against churches and pastors in 2019, especially in rural areas.

At the end of 2018, for example, a mob of about 100 people attacked the Assemblies of God church building in Beliatta, southern Sri Lanka, demanding an end to worship services, and threatened to kill the pastor and his family.

Three days later, about 500 people, including Buddhist monks, staged a protest against the church, demanding the pastor leave the village.

Release partners say that Hindu extremist groups from India, including the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), are now extending their reach into Sri Lanka, especially in eastern areas.

CENTRAL ASIA

Legal restrictions and attacks by extremists will continue to put pressure on Christians in Central Asia in 2019.

In 2018, for example, our partner reported the following incidents:

- Christians were fined for preaching the gospel in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan.
- Believers throughout Central Asia were threatened and ridiculed, with their children suffering discrimination at school.
- A young Christian in Kyrgyzstan was severely beaten up for his faith, after a group of radical Muslims demanded that he renounce Christianity and return to Islam.

‘Please continue to prayerfully support faithful ministers who live and work in Central Asia – despite persecution,’ said our partner.

MIDDLE EAST



EGYPT

In Egypt Christians remain vulnerable to attacks by militants, especially outside the capital Cairo. Despite protection offered by the constitution, many Christians will continue to face violent attacks and discrimination during 2019.

In November 2018, for example, gunmen opened fire on two buses that were carrying Coptic Christians towards the Monastery of Saint Samuel the Confessor in Minya Governorate. Seven Christians were killed and seven more injured.

In May 2017 a bus carrying Christians on their way to the same monastery was also attacked by militants, killing 28 people.

In Sultan village, Minya Governorate, three Muslims were arrested last August after trying to burn a church. This was the fourth attack against the church in two months.

IRAQ

'Christians in Iraq continue to face persecution from Islamic State and other terror groups,' reports one partner.

'While Islamic State has been defeated on the battlefield, it remains a nebulous force able to mount attacks on vulnerable minority groups. In tandem with this threat, Christians are now caught in the middle of a territorial dispute in the north between



Coptic Christians continue to be under threat in Egypt.

the Iraqi state and Kurdish Regional Government.

'While thousands of Christians have returned to their ancestral homes in the Nineveh Plain, much of which had been under Islamic State occupation, it remains to be seen whether returnees have the will or means to rebuild their devastated villages.'

As a result of continuing persecution and conflict the Christian population in Iraq dropped from 1.5 million in 2003 to less than 200,000 in 2018.

One Christian woman, an Iraqi refugee, told our partner: *'We are so grateful for your help. God bless you all. It makes us feel that there are good people in this world trying to support us.'*



Many displaced Iraqis have fled to refugee camps in northern Iraq.

IRAN

Christians in Iran experienced growing persecution during 2018 as the authorities targeted those involved in any kind of Christian ministry.

'There is a campaign to try to stop the spread of Christianity, to arrest those who are leading house churches and those involved in evangelism and teaching,' said our partner.

'Persecution is on the increase because the authorities are aware of the growth of house churches and are determined at all costs to stem this. In fact their overall goal is to exterminate the Farsi-speaking church.'

'Pray for the protection of house churches. In view of security pressures, these groups are having to find alternative ways of meeting.'

As a result of growing government pressure, persecution is likely to continue in 2019.

'WE ARE SO GRATEFUL FOR YOUR HELP. GOD BLESS YOU ALL. IT MAKES US FEEL THAT THERE ARE GOOD PEOPLE IN THIS WORLD TRYING TO SUPPORT US.'