

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2022

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



Children displaced by conflict in Tigray in 2021. Photo: Reuters/Baz Ratner.

AFRICA



ERITREA/ETHIOPIA

In 2021 continuing civil war in Tigray, northern Ethiopia, forced thousands to flee, including hundreds of Eritrean Christians living in UN refugee camps near the border. The conflict has been marked by brutality and has caused food shortages and famine.

The government of Eritrea continues to persecute evangelical Christians, banning all meetings and arresting individuals at will.

'Christians have been the most

persecuted group of people in Eritrea. It is because they won't stop gathering and won't stop worshipping. It is beyond the government's control,' said our partner Dr Berhane Asmelash.

'In 2021 we have not seen any change in the government's policy,' he said. *'Yet Christianity has continued to grow.'* An estimated 180 Christians remain in prison.

According to the UN, half a million Eritreans have left their country – more than ten per cent of the population. In 2022 it is anticipated that repression, forced military conscription and economic collapse will force many more to become refugees – including persecuted Christians.

NIGERIA

Attacks by Boko Haram terrorists and Fulani herdsmen militia continued throughout 2021. By July over 3,400 Christians had been killed. *'Attacks by Fulani militias destroyed over 50 villages and displaced nearly 5,000 Christians,'* said our partner.

'The attacks by the Fulani now include kidnappings for ransom. Churches, church leaders and Christian communities remain the primary targets.'

'2022 is a political campaign year and from past antecedents, attacks by Boko Haram and Fulani militants have increased at these periods. They see that the security agencies are unable to contain them,' said our partner.

BURKINA FASO

In 2021 jihadists targeted Christians in the north of the country, forcing churches to close their doors and meet in secret. The attacks ranged from bombings, killings, kidnappings and school burnings to assaults on places of worship and religious leaders.

According to the Global Terrorism Index, the faction responsible for most of the killings is Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. *'The situation facing Christians is now similar to Nigeria,'* said our partner. These pressures will continue in the coming year.

EASTERN ASIA



NORTH KOREA

The complete prohibition on Christian activities and identity continued in North Korea during 2021.

'Persecution remains constant because the existence of Christianity among North Koreans poses a direct threat to the claims of legitimacy and primacy by the state and particularly the Kim family,' said Dr Eric Foley, CEO of our associate ministry Voice of the Martyrs Korea.

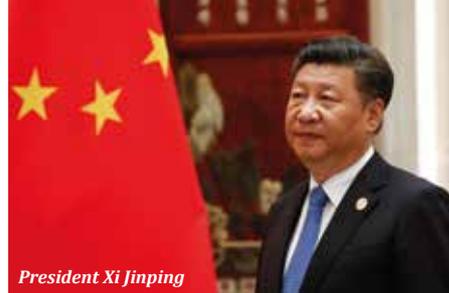
Christians who are discovered or exposed face the severest penalties, including imprisonment in labour and concentration camps, and execution.

'However, the church is growing faster than the church in the UK, the US and South Korea,' said Dr Foley. During 2021, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, requests from Christians for Bibles increased dramatically, since the authorities reduced their house-to-house searches to avoid infection.

'Let's pray not only that the gospel continues to spread, but also that the church outside of North Korea – in the UK, the US and South Korea – be encouraged and strengthened by the witness of North Korean underground Christians,' he said.

Unless there is a collapse in the regime, we anticipate that the extreme, systematic persecution of Christians in North Korea will continue in the coming year.

'Be encouraged and strengthened by the witness of North Korean underground Christians.'



President Xi Jinping

CHINA

During 2021, many unregistered churches have been unable to meet in larger groups, reports our partner. *'Since the major lockdowns due to Covid-19, resumption of meetings has not been possible. As a result most of these churches are meeting in small groups, usually in apartments.'*

The message that religion is bad for education and achieving progress in life is being promoted in schools and universities. *'Even junior grades have now had "Xi Jinping thought" added as part of the curriculum, which is anti-religion. A number of pastors have been arrested and church services closed or disrupted, even among registered churches.'*

Anything that does not promote the Chinese communist ideology is branded as 'un-Chinese' and efforts are made to remove it. Christianity obviously does not answer to the communist party, and so in their terms is unacceptable.

'Persecution is increasing, and spreading across the whole country,' said our partner – and will continue in 2022.



Military parade in Pyongyang, North Korea. Stock photo.

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2022



Desperate Afghans wait near Kabul airport in August 2021, hoping to escape before the Taliban takeover.

more than 300 violent attacks against Christians over a nine-month period last year – including 288 incidents of mob violence across 21 states. Attacks against Christians are likely to continue in 2022.

PAKISTAN

False blasphemy accusations, abductions, forced conversions and marriages, physical violence, destruction of property, discrimination and even religiously motivated murder continue to affect religious minorities, including Christians, says our partner.

'In 2021 Covid-19 disturbed people mentally, physically, economically and spiritually. We have helped people by spending time with them in prayer, and by providing practical support.'

Christians are likely to continue to face oppression and discrimination at work, at school and college, in accessing services and resources, and in the legal system.

SOUTH-EAST ASIA



MALAYSIA

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

'Christians individually are not being persecuted, but as a whole anyone who believes in anything else but Islam

SOUTH ASIA



AFGHANISTAN

Last year was a tumultuous year with the Taliban taking over the country. *'Christians experienced fear of being reported by family members or neighbours, and fear of violent treatment by the Taliban,'* said our partner. *'We heard of some homes being searched and of some individuals receiving threats.'*

For Afghan Christians there have always been high levels of persecution, and this remains. The change for 2022 is the very real threat of increased widespread persecution and of higher levels of violent persecution.

'Christians who don't follow the outwards forms of Islam such as

praying at the mosque, and saying the Shahadah [the Islamic profession of faith], will stand out more clearly and this increases their vulnerability to persecution and pressures to conform,' said our partner.

A poor harvest and a major breakdown in the Afghan economy caused severe food shortages last year – and these are expected to get worse in the coming year. *'Lack of work and food is a major problem for everyone, and known Christians are likely to be discriminated against,'* said our partner. Read more about Afghanistan on page 6.

INDIA

Attacks against Christians are rising and more states are imposing anti-conversion laws. This comes as growing numbers of the Indian underclass, the Dalits, are turning to Christianity, and as right-wing Hindu nationalism is on the rise. Karnataka state, for example, is poised to impose anti-conversion legislation.

The Evangelical Fellowship of India recorded 145 incidents of religious persecution against Christians – including three murders – in the first six months of 2021. A coalition of NGOs, including the Association for Protection of Civil Rights, listed

has problems in running a business or applying for loans, for example,' said one of our partners.

'Churches face more and more restrictions and during the pandemic period were not allowed to operate, unlike the mosques which have been operating all the time.'

Over the years, government policies have systematically discriminated against non-Muslims, in particular Christians, said another partner. Such discrimination is likely to continue this year.

CENTRAL ASIA

'In general, at the central and local levels, there are restrictions and discriminatory bureaucratic procedures that prevent churches from obtaining permits – especially targeting pentecostal or charismatic groups, which are the fastest-growing churches in the region,' reports our partner.

However, during the past year the intensity of persecution has decreased. *'This is not because the authorities in these countries have become better at treating Christians, but because the authorities face many other problems during the Covid-19 pandemic, such as the poor state of medical institutions and the lack of medicines.'*

Our partner notes that in Uzbekistan, *'there is a noticeable improvement in the area of state-church relations'*. However, in 2022 Christians throughout Central Asia will continue to face restrictions. Read more about Central Asia on page 14.



MIDDLE EAST



EGYPT

Despite protection provided by the constitution, Christians will continue to suffer oppression and persecution during 2022. Most live as second-class citizens, experiencing discrimination in law, education and employment.

'Christians are a minority who face direct and indirect persecution in their daily lives,' said our partner. *'In previous years, Christians have been subjected to violence, such as church bombings and attacks on buses carrying Christian pilgrims. We are thankful that in the past year there were no major incidents such as these.'*

Christians in Upper Egypt face the harshest persecution. *'Christians may be overlooked for jobs or promotion, their children are made to sit at the back of the class, shop owners may be boycotted and hospital patients may not receive proper treatment,'* said our partner. *'In some cases Christians are forced to leave their houses and possessions, and Christian girls and women have been kidnapped and forced to embrace Islam.'*

IRAQ

'We provide support to refugees and internally displaced people from Iraq and Syria who have fled their homes and now live in poverty. Many have lost family members and cannot provide for their children,' said Release International partner Jamal.



'Children, adults, the elderly – all refugees deserve the right to be treated as valued human beings. While Covid-19 has limited our movement, it has not stopped us from getting supplies to the needy.' Continuing instability will ensure that Christian refugees will need support in the coming year.

IRAN

'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,' reports our partner. *'In fact their overall goal is to exterminate the Persian-speaking church and only to allow Christian minority groups to operate. Longer prison sentences are being given by the courts to some Christian workers.'*

There is no doubt that the government is concerned that disillusioned Muslims are becoming Christians. *'Publicity on the internet or in the Christian press about the growth of the church has alerted the government to what is happening,'* said our partner.

Converts and Christian workers and leaders are likely to face increasing pressures in 2022. *'The very fear of persecution is a worry as believers meeting in their house groups do not know if they are under surveillance or not.'*

