

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2024

Many Christians around the world are experiencing increased persecution. Here key partners report on the pressures believers are likely to face in the next 12 months as hostile governments and militant groups seek to control and even destroy the church

The religious violence in the northeastern state of Manipur, which saw 60 killed and 50 churches destroyed, sparked candle-lit demonstrations in India and beyond



SOUTH ASIA



INDIA

During 2023 Christians experienced physical and emotional abuse and harassment of pastors and believers; destruction of church buildings; false charges and imprisonment, and the prohibition of home prayer meetings.

Most significant was the widespread ethnic violence that turned into

religious persecution in Manipur in northeast India in May, which saw 60 people killed and 50 churches burnt or destroyed.

'Minorities in the state continue to grapple with the after-effects of the ethnic and communal violence that erupted earlier this year,' said our partner.

One pastor has been unable to hold Sunday services for the past five months. In September he had to conduct services for believers over the telephone. Another church, whose premises were demolished in the May attack, no longer has a place to hold meetings. The pastor cares for his congregation by visiting them individually.

There are ongoing threats and persecution in the surrounding areas but where possible pastors continue to conduct Sunday services.

More widely across India persecution is increasing, reported our partner. *'The Hindu nationalist Government*



is complicit in all these attacks on religious minorities by Hindu fanatics,' it said.

'The national elections will be completed in May 2024 and if the current Government is re-elected, they will have even more power to act without consequence. They may change the constitution.

'[We will] continue training our workers, bolstering the courage of our believers, appealing to the governments of other nations for advocacy and sanctions.'

Thanks to the financial gifts of Release International supporters, our partners were able to help a number of Christians who experienced persecution last year:

A teenage girl from Manipur who fled the violence was taken in by our partners and provided with a new home; a Christian who was arrested on false charges of forced conversion was released after our partner's intervention, and a pastor was helped with medical care after being attacked by militants.

'We are so thankful to all the supporters and prayer partners who have made possible the helping of persecuted Christians all across India. As the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities increases dramatically with each passing month, we are thankful that we have a global network of people standing with us and our workers.'

PRAY

- That those being persecuted for their faith in Jesus would be strong and know that God is with them during their trials
- For an end to the violence and persecution in Manipur and that the state of Manipur would be able to rebuild again. Pray that Prime Minister Narendra Modi would address the issues there and intervene to stop any ongoing violence
- That those in Uttar Pradesh who have the constitutional rights to gather and worship would be safe in their efforts to follow Jesus
- Praise God that so many people are following Jesus in India through our partner's church ministry
- Pray that pastors and other workers would be faithful in their efforts to build a community of believers, and disciple those new in their faith. Pray for their health, protection and provision as well as unity in the church
- For an end to human trafficking in India which is a main source of persecution against poor and oppressed girls and women in both religious and ethnic minorities



The presence of the Taliban has caused many to flee Afghanistan

AFGHANISTAN

Christians have reportedly experienced growing persecution from their communities and extended families in the past couple of years, say our partners, who are in regular contact with Afghan believers and seekers – and that persecution is expected to continue in 2024.

This can take the form of trying to force them to recant their faith, rejecting them from the family, reporting them to local authorities or religious leaders, and sometimes threatening them with violence.

The Taliban also carry out searches of homes, as well as of people's phones, said our partner.

'As far as we are aware this is not specifically targeted at Christians, but when Bibles or Christian content are discovered on a phone they are taken into custody for questioning, sometimes being beaten or imprisoned. Many callers are fearful that their phones are being listened to and conversations recorded and ask us to contact them through other forms of media. All of this has created an environment of increasing fear and isolation. As one caller put it, "We live in fear everywhere we go."

'The fear of persecution, as well as actual persecution is increasing. Some people tell us that websites and social media sites they visit are monitored. We also hear of generally

increasing pressure to conform to a strict interpretation of the majority religion, and those not conforming increasingly stand out. We don't hear that Christians are being particularly targeted, but where they are discovered or reported by family, friends or religious leaders, we hear of increased persecution.'

In addition to this, Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries are being threatened or deported back to Afghanistan. Christians among these are extremely vulnerable especially if they were seeking asylum because of their faith. *'An Afghan migrant family in a nearby country said, "We live in fear and stress, nothing is moving with our [asylum] case. Meanwhile the authorities are searching and checking Afghan migrants. We need your prayers."*

Our partner said it was becoming increasingly difficult for even small groups of Afghan Christians to gather for worship. Several believers reported the pressure to attend a mosque, as well as some believers being detained by the authorities. They are afraid to meet in groups or draw attention to themselves, and they struggle with fear and mental trauma. One told our partner: *'As a few of us gathered, we were arrested and detained.'* There seem to be more online groups forming, but even they can be monitored.

On top of this there appears to be an increase in family or others reporting Christians or trying to get them to renounce Jesus.

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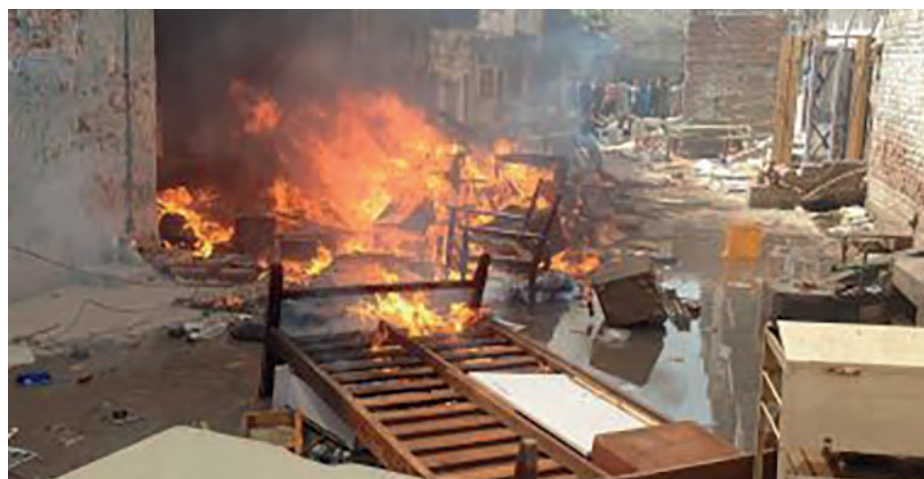
Our partner said: *'We know that our tears and pain are noticed, and we appreciate your love and concern for the persecuted body of Christ in Afghanistan. Thank you for your faithful prayers, support, and encouragement for Afghan believers in Afghanistan and those displaced to nearby countries.'*

PRAY

- For our partner's follow-up and discipleship team members who engage over the phone and on social media with Afghan believers. Listening to the problems, stresses and trauma of Afghan seekers and Christians every day can weigh them down
- For believers who depend on the daily radio, satellite-TV and online Christian programmes that help to feed and encourage them; that they can access them safely. Pray for the new radio programmes being prepared in 2024

PAKISTAN

On August 16, in Jaranwala, a violent mob burned 23 churches and 80 houses simply because of a false accusation against two brothers. This incident not only affected the Jaranwala Christian community but caused a different type of fear among believers all over Pakistan.



More than 20 churches were destroyed in a mob attack on Jaranwala Christian community in August
Photo: Aid to the Church in Need

After this incident, Christians were threatened even in remote areas of Pakistan, which went unreported in the media. In Lahore a Christian working at a hospital was dismissed just for visiting Jaranwala to see the burned churches. Incidents like this increased in August as stories of false accusations appeared every day.

On the whole, persecution is growing gradually, most notably in the rise in false cases of blasphemy, our partner said. *'Mischievous behaviour against Christians is increasing. If someone gets to know about any Christian's identity, their behavior towards that person changes.'*

'Due to the rise in persecution, Christians are losing their jobs as well. They are suffering because of their joblessness and those who are still working among the majority community fear losing their job; it is likely to remain the same in 2024. Even Christian children face bullying in schools.'

'We should keep praying for our brothers and sisters who are struggling every day.'

PRAY

- For protection for Christians especially in areas that have seen unrest such as Jaranwala
- For provision for believers particularly those who have lost jobs as a result of their faith
- That God brings more people into His kingdom through our partner's ministry

AFRICA



NIGERIA

Christians are facing another year of suffering as government complacency at a federal and local level emboldens the various Islamist terrorist groups operating in central and northeast Nigeria, our partner believes.

'Persecution continues to spread to many rural communities that have been attacked previously. Though the attacks on large communities to inflict large casualties have subsided, the persistent killing of small groups and individuals continue to spread across the central regions of southern Kaduna, Benue, Plateau and Taraba states.'

'This is because the old jihadi rule of engagement continues to play out, attacking Christian communities and dispossessing them of their lands by destroying their food supplies and forcing them to convert or flee.'

During 2023, villages and communities were persistently attacked, with more than 6,000 people estimated to have been killed by Islamist Fulani militia and other terrorists. Fulani have forced Christian villages to pay millions of naira in order not to be attacked but, even when some have paid, the terrorist groups have still raided them, especially in southern Kaduna. Christians have been kidnapped for ransom, while many farmlands were deliberately destroyed by the Fulani to force the villages to either flee or face starvation.

Our partner said the terrorist groups, which include Boko Haram, are



Release International partners provide aid for Christians displaced by the violence of militant groups such as Boko Haram

funded, encouraged and supported by various bodies both locally and internationally.

'It is therefore certain that the pressure on Christian communities will be increased and sustained.'

At the same time our partner reported that pastors who had been trained as a result of Release International support had continued evangelism in regions controlled by Boko Haram.

'We are excited to report more communities are being reached. The Lord has answered prayers for opportunity for prison evangelism for a group of our trained pastors particularly to members of Boko Haram who are in prison. We have also seen the Lord's deliverance for our travelling teams.

'We send our deepest appreciation to all those who stand with us in prayers and who support the persecuted in every way they can. We are still standing here because of your sacrifice and support.'

PRAY

- For families and victims who have suffered attacks or have been kidnapped
- For the Church to find the courage to continue missions and evangelism despite the violence against Christians

- For God to raise up godly leaders whom He will use to bring better governance in the country

ERITREA

The Eritrean Government continued to arrest Christians in 2023 while at the same time releasing others.

Among those detained were a group of 44 believers who were seized while gathering in two private homes at the start of the year.

Many Christians are held without charge and detained indefinitely. Torture and brutality are commonplace including being held in shipping containers in the desert. Many have been in prison for more than a decade.

In March police arrested 30 Christians who had gathered to worship in a home in the town of Keren, 60 miles northwest of the capital, Asmara.

At the same time nine Christian prisoners were released.

Then in April more than 100 Christian college students were arrested in Asmara after gathering to sing and record video clips for social media.

This arrest put the number of Christian prisoners at more than 500, around double the number 12 months previously.



Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel has been in prison since 2004

Our partner said that, although Christian worship gatherings were banned, the church would continue serving God underground.

Even meeting for weddings is becoming more risky as the Government tries to weaken the church in whatever way it can.

The war between Eritrea and Ethiopia has also affected the church, with some Christian leaders forced to participate in the conflict.

PRAY

- For all the Christians currently detained, often in harsh conditions. Some have been behind bars for more than a decade. Two,

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pastor Haile Naizgi and Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel, have been jailed since 2004. Pray that more would be released in 2024

- That God would thwart the efforts of the Government to infiltrate underground churches
- Thank God for the release of seven women and six men, all Christians, who had reportedly been in prison for about ten years. Pray they can rebuild their lives

EAST AFRICA

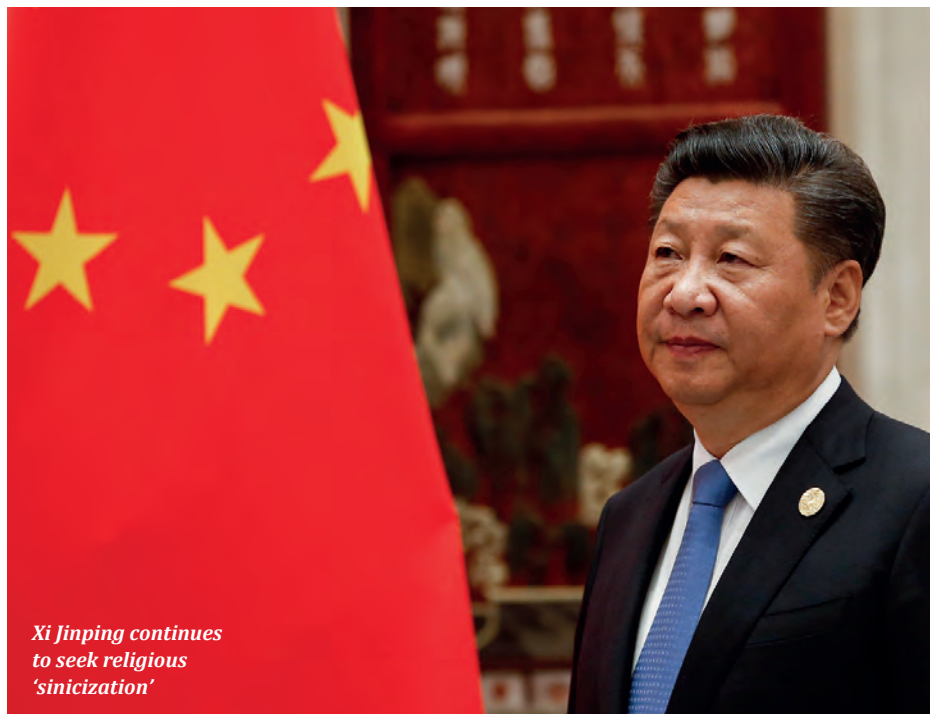
Persecution of Christians in this region remains severe and is expected to continue into 2024.

Our partners report that there is a small window for freedom of religion but harsh, ingrained religious beliefs and a hostility to other faiths combined with a lack of opportunity to expand their worldview means many are unwilling to listen to the gospel.

However, our partners said: *'We expect to see more coming to faith through online engagement and physical connections to fellowships,'* even though resistance may well follow.

They added that as a result more people would become disconnected from their biological families as well as their cultures. Hence, there would be an increased need for more prayer support for protection and provision as well as being connected to Christian families. They also expect an increased number of those fleeing for their lives due to persecution.

'We have come this far because of the deliberate prayers of the faithful ones. Knowing that we are one body in diverse locations, through the prayers you pray we have a sure connection and are reminded that there are parts of the body of Christ who are praying for us. Remembering that makes us bold and encourages us to keep on the journey.'



Xi Jinping continues to seek religious 'sinicization'

EASTERN ASIA



CHINA

Many churches (both registered and unregistered) have been prevented from meeting and some have been closed down. There have been many reports of Christian leaders being arrested for questioning and imprisoned on charges of national security as well as fraud. Children of Christian parents have been harassed and discriminated against and have been prevented from attending Christian meetings.

Our partner said that persecution

was increasing. *'There are tighter and more complex religious constraints, and Christians in China are facing increased harassment and persecution.'*

This was due to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adopting an aggressive policy of social control and the 'securitization of everything'. Having cemented his position with a third (and unlimited) term of office, President Xi Jinping continues to seek his goal of religious 'sinicization'. This means preaching and promoting doctrines that support and comply with the CCP's leadership, ideology and values. ***'The ultimate aim is to eliminate Christianity within China altogether,'*** added our partners.

They said that in 2024 there would be increasing pressure to demonstrate total allegiance to the CCP and President Xi, above any commitment to Jesus Christ and the Bible, and to gather in official venues only, rather than in houses or premises not recognised by the Government.

Also expected is increasing censorship online, where there is a strict ban on religious content without an official licence. It will become harder for Christians in unregistered churches to obtain Bibles, as they cannot be legally sold in the Chinese marketplace, including online and on Bible apps. With the introduction of a new and

comprehensive anti-espionage law, many Christians who communicate with foreigners or foreign entities run the risk of being accused of sharing information inappropriately. A number of church leaders have already been imprisoned falsely on alleged charges of fraud.

'Please continue to pray for and encourage others to pray for Christians in China, including the Chinese diaspora who typically have not had a burden to reach out and support those in mainland China.'

'A shortage of Bibles is becoming an increasing reality, now that Bibles cannot be legally sold in China. The unregistered church has zero access to legal copies and needs help to source a minimum of 2 million copies annually for their new believers. Realistically, the need is much greater, potentially up to 20-plus million Bibles a year.'

PRAY

- For wisdom in assessing how best to continue to support China's believers (in what is perhaps the most difficult ministry context in 40 years)
- That the distribution of SD cards will continue safely and without detection
- For the best Christian resources to reach leaders and believers, which meet their needs and empower them in their Christian lives

NORTH KOREA

North Korea isolated its citizens even more during the Covid pandemic, evidenced most clearly by the erection of a second 'border wall' along the China border, but that isolation was hardly a time of national stagnation, said our partners, Voice of the Martyrs Korea (VOMK).

'North Korea went nuclear, tested missiles, continued its military parades, and carried out computer hacking at a level of sophistication and success that few nations can match. Kim Jong Un shared headlines with Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping.'

Even ordinary citizens used the lockdown period to their advantage, watching smuggled videos of Korean dramas, and in the case of believers, listened to Christian radio broadcasts. Daily broadcasts (including new ones added by VOMK during the daytime hours when workers would normally be away from home), digital Bibles, and Christian video content all spread rapidly. *'Only now are North Korean authorities beginning to realise and correct their omission with resumed house-to-house searches. Jamming efforts against broadcasts, including especially ours, continue to increase.'*

They expect there may be an increase in the number and frequency of the desperate and unusual forms of escape that have already begun.

At the same time, even though there is a famine of God's word, more North Koreans are seeing the Bible than at any other time in Korean history!

VOMK said: *'At the request of our North Korean underground Christian partners, VOMK continues to provide Bibles by land, sea, air, radio and internet. We continue to equip North Korean defectors in South Korea with the discipleship strategies and methods entrusted to us by the underground church. Our students reach North Koreans wherever they are found.'*

PRAY

- That the bold and faithful evangelistic spirit of the North Korean underground church would impact Release International's supporters and help them to prepare for underground church
- That Christians in North Korea would remain faithful witnesses



North Korea continued its military parades during the pandemic; Kim Jong Un (pictured above) shared headlines with other authoritarian leaders

CENTRAL ASIA

Persecution of Christians in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Karakalpakstan (an autonomous region within Uzbekistan), Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and the Buddhist Republic of Kalmykia is expected to remain broadly unchanged although from a human rights point of view there have been improvements in Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan.

MIDDLE EAST



IRAN

'Whilst we give thanks to the Lord that there has not been a wave of persecution against those who have converted (even though some of these can face opposition from family or harassment in their work or studies) there is obviously a campaign to try to stop the spread of Christianity, to arrest those who are leading house churches and those who are involved in evangelism and teaching,' said our 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. Longer prison sentences are being given by the courts to some Christian workers. We are thankful that one who was sentenced to ten years has now been released but another has recently started his sentence of ten years.

'There is no doubt that the Government is upset and concerned that disillusioned Muslims are becoming Christians. They are not willing to accept and acknowledge the rights of those who have converted from a Muslim background.'

Our partner said it was likely that converts and in particular workers and leaders would continue to face increasing pressures in 2024.

'The very fear of persecution is a worry as believers meeting in their house group do not know if they are under surveillance or not. These pressures have led to an exodus of some believers/workers from Iran and this is likely to continue in 2024. However, many Iranian refugees who have been living in Turkey for many years are finding it increasingly difficult to be able to remain there and some are facing deportation back to Iran.'

Our partner said that the protests and demonstrations under the banner of "Woman, Life, Freedom" in the past year presented a significant challenge

to the Islamic republic.

'This movement has now been largely suppressed but the ongoing controls, repression and increased surveillance only adds pressure on believers, house churches and any Christian activity.'

At the same time the number of Iranians coming to Christ continued to increase in 2023. There are many economic pressures at the present time but house churches, along with support from Release International, have helped needy believers by providing food and medicines.

'A unique situation exists in Iran in that, even though the Government is firmly opposed to the work of the gospel, many disillusioned Iranians are seeking God. The recent unrest and upheaval inside the country demonstrated the fact that people want justice and freedom. Therefore at a time like this, all means of evangelism, such as the Christian satellite programmes, social media and the ministry of workers on the ground, become so strategic.'

PRAY

- Pray for the protection of house churches. In view of security pressures, groups are meeting in smaller numbers than before. Pray against a spirit of fear, and that they will know the peace and the presence of the Lord
- For the training of new workers which will provide desperately needed human resources on the ground

