

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

JAN-MAR 2025

# voice

of Persecuted Christians

## HELPING OPPRESSED CHRISTIANS

Holding on in  
spite of cruelty

*Egyptian converts endure  
brutal family backlash*

Persecution  
Trends 2025

*Where believers face  
greatest hostility*

Scripture  
comforts a  
modern-day 'Job'

*Nigerian father's  
story of loss and  
perseverance*

*News, stories and prayer requests  
from persecuted Christians around the world*



# Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

**When family  
brings only  
trauma**

**At this time of year many of us will have been spending precious time with family and friends and enjoyed special moments together. We will be able to look back with fondness as we thank God for cherished moments.**

However, for some of our persecuted brothers and sisters (and maybe for some of you too) the thought of 'family' can be painful and raises difficult emotions, as I found out on a recent visit to our partners in Egypt.

In that country becoming a Christian in a Muslim family can have severe consequences. For 'Ayesha' (see page 6), it meant being kidnapped and tortured by her brother and seeing her two precious daughters beaten by her uncle – simply because of her conversion to Christ. I can't imagine having to watch helplessly as your children are physically attacked in front of you, and all because of your commitment to Christ. It's one thing suffering yourself for your decision but when you see the others you love most being abused for your actions the level of pain must be intolerable.

So at the start of a new year please remember Ayesha, and the many others like her, in Egypt and beyond, who are rejected and abused by family and community because they, like us, have accepted Christ's invitation to follow Him.

## TRENDS 2025

In the January edition of *Voice* magazine we always publish a survey undertaken with our partners

detailing current persecution and the trends reflected therein.

While there are many ongoing situations this year there are also new developments that I would particularly like to draw your attention to: the rise of jihadist violence against Christians in Burkina Faso and the increase in persecution against believers in India, which would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. My heart also goes out to Iranian Christians living in Turkey who face deportation back to Iran because of the changing political environment. The prospect is concerning, to say the least. So as you read the Trends report please do take time to pray through the specific issues raised in it.

## REGULAR SUPPORT

Giving regularly to Release International through a Direct Debit enables us more easily to plan how we support partners like Stefanos Foundation in Nigeria who have cared for persecuted Christians such as Luka and his son Magnificent (see page 10). It's simple to set up using the tear-off section of this letter or the Connect and Support card.

## FANTASTIC FUNDRAISERS

I am always thrilled to hear how you, our supporters, take practical steps to help our persecuted family. On page 21 we report on just two of your fundraising initiatives: a 100-mile sponsored walk around the Isle of Man coast and a coffee and craft day in Northern Ireland. Thank you so much for showing you care.

# CONTENTS

4

## FAITH UNDER FIRE

*News for your prayers*



6

## FAMILY BACKLASH

*Egyptians pay the price*



10

## MODERN-DAY 'JOB'

*Loss and perseverance in Nigeria*

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2025



13

## PERSECUTION TRENDS 2025

*Where Christians are likely to face hostility in the coming year*



21

## STAR TREKKER

*Laurie's 100-mile challenge*

22

## HOPE IN OPPRESSION

*Biblical reflection*

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

**voice**

of Persecuted Christians

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.

Release International: PO Box 54, Orpington BR5 4RT T: 01689 823491 E: [info@releaseinternational.org](mailto:info@releaseinternational.org)

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FUNDRAISING REGULATOR

# Faith under fire

## Nigerian believers targeted by militants

**A Christian in Nigeria's Plateau state was ambushed and shot dead by militant Fulani herdsmen a week after another believer and his mother in the Jos North area were killed, according to sources.**

**In Daika village, Mangu county, south of Jos, the state capital, 30-year-old Fwangshak Lesun was ambushed and killed on November 3 as he rode his motorcycle on a local road, sources said.**

**'Lesun was returning to Daika from Mangu town at about 8.30pm when he was ambushed by armed herdsmen who shot and killed him,' local resident Christopher Luka told Christian Daily International-Morning Star News (CDI-MSN).**

**Lesun's family recovered his body near the Mangu-Daika bridge and buried him the next day in Daika, Luka said.**

**On October 27 in the Jos North area, a Christian woman, Mary Jonathan, and her adult son, Mark, were killed by 'Muslim Fulani herdsmen' who attacked their home around 1am. A third member of the family, Dickson Timothy, was in critical condition at a clinic in Jos, said local resident John Dauda.**

(Source: Christian Daily International-Morning Star News)

**Modern-day 'Job', page 10**

## Pakistani Christian woman rescued after forced conversion



*Sana Javed is reunited with her parents*

A young Pakistani Christian woman has been reunited with her family after she was forcibly converted and married to a Muslim.

Sana Javed, at 18 the youngest of Javed Masih's seven children, had gone to a nearby shop in Lahore, Punjab province, on June 9 and not returned.

'Our frantic search for her ended in mid-October, when I received a phone call from a Christian in Balochistan province who informed me about her whereabouts,' said Masih, a truck driver. He would not see her again until November 14. Masih said that a woman identified only as 'Hafsa' had befriended his daughter on social media a few days before she disappeared.

*'Sana told us that the girl emotionally blackmailed her and forced her to meet in person without her family's knowledge,'* Masih told Christian Daily International-Morning Star News (CDI-MSN).

When Sana reached Hafsa's house, she was immediately deprived of her phone and held hostage, he said. *'A cleric was called, and Sana was forced to recite the Kalima [proclamation of conversion to Islam] and marry an elderly Muslim man under threats of violence,'* he said. *'She later found out that he was a maternal uncle of Hafsa.'*

Three days after filing a report with police, the family discovered officers had misplaced it, he said. Masih filed a new report and police registered a First Information Report (FIR), but officers made no effort to find her, he said.

Thankfully Masih later received a call from a Christian schoolteacher in Balochistan who told him his daughter was in his village, and that a local politician had contacted him to help find her family.

A legal team from Christians' True Spirit accompanied police and the family to the village in Balochistan, where they recovered Sana on November 14, he said.

Sana told CDI-MSN: *'I was forced to convert to Islam and put my thumb impression on the marriage certificate. They said they would kill me if I did not obey their order.'*

- A pastor in Pakistan has gone into hiding with his family after a neighbour who had reportedly raped his 14-year-old daughter had then tried to kidnap her and force her to convert to Islam and marry him.

The daughter of the pastor in Sheikhpura District, Punjab province, was on her way to school on October 31 when the man had tried to abduct her. She managed to escape and return home where she told her parents that he *'had been harassing her for a long time to convert to Islam and marry her,'* the pastor told CDI-MSN.

When the pastor confronted the man, he was threatened and fearing for his daughter's safety moved his family to a relative's house in Lahore.

On November 2 the pastor filed a complaint with police, who registered an FIR but did not take any action against the suspect, he said.

The 63-year-old pastor and his wife were stunned when their daughter later revealed that the man had raped her in September.

*'She couldn't bear the agony and trauma any longer and broke down in tears,'* he said, adding that she had kept quiet about the assault, fearing the man would kill her and her family.

The pastor again began visiting police, but his pleas for justice appeared to fall on deaf ears, he said. Frustrated and suspecting the man had influenced the police not to take action, he sought court intervention.

His attorney, Malik Zaman Haider, said the girl has now recorded her statement against the man in court, and that he has filed a request for a medical examination and the addition of rape charges to the FIR.

(Source: Christian Daily International-Morning Star News)

## Listen to our latest podcasts



**EGYPT: REJECTED FOR CHRIST** Coming to faith in Christ brings us the joy of a new family: the Body of Christ. However, sometimes it can also bring painful separation from our old family and community. In this edition of the Voice podcast host Kenneth Harrod speaks to Release International colleague Jack Norman about Christian life in Egypt.

**NIGERIA: SUFFERING WITH CHRIST** Serving on the frontline, where Christians are suffering severe persecution, can be challenging in many ways. In this edition of the Voice podcast we speak to our Nigerian partner, Mark Lipdo, who for several years has run the Stefanos Foundation, a ministry addressing the trauma that many Nigerian Christians experience.

**PAKISTAN: LIVING ON HIGH ALERT** Many of Pakistan's Christian communities live on constant 'high alert', aware that violence can erupt at any moment. In this edition of the Voice podcast we speak to one of our partners in Pakistan, as we look back on a much-publicised incident last year, and reflect on what life can be like today for Christians living there.

**BURKINA FASO: FACING THE RISING TIDE** Across sub-Saharan Africa, Christian communities are coming under increased pressure from various militant, Islamist groups. Violent attacks in northern Nigeria have been well documented in recent years, but in this edition of the Voice podcast we speak to Release International staff member John Lawson about another country in that region; one that we hear far less about: Burkina Faso.

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*Amid the devastation new opportunities are opening up for the gospel in Lebanon*

## Hope amid the suffering in Lebanon

The recent conflict in the Middle East has opened up new opportunities for sharing the gospel in Lebanon, according to a Release International partner there. Speaking with the sound of fighter bombers flying over Beirut in the background, our partner said: *'It's been a very stressful time for all. But we have seen – because of the situation – the door has been opened for thousands of people to hear about Christ and to come and find true spiritual refuge; to find new hope.'*

For several years our partner in Lebanon has provided emergency relief to those fleeing from Syria and has supported Christians who face persecution from their families for coming to faith in Christ. Even though Lebanon enjoys comprehensive religious freedom those who convert to follow Jesus face extreme pressure and, at times, the threat of physical violence.

*'There are lots of challenges. But when you see people coming to the Lord; when you see them more and more attached to the love of the Lord and they don't want to let go of the Lord: this is really our biggest joy,'* he added.

## Indian families banned from villages



*A field looted in Michwar village  
Photo: CSW*

Eight village councils in a district of Chhattisgarh state recently passed a joint resolution prohibiting Christians from staying in their villages.

The resolution on November 17 declared that believers in these Sukma district villages would either have to leave or renounce their faith, and if they failed to do either then all their fields, belongings and property would be seized. Around 100 Christians were affected by the order.

The matter was brought to the notice of the chief of one of the villages, Michwar, who confirmed the resolution and claimed that the rule of the village council superseded that of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees the right to freedom of religion or belief under Article 25.

The next day the Christians filed a written complaint at the Gadiras Police Station in Michwar and provided audio evidence of what the village chief had said. However, the police initially refused to file a First Information Report (FIR), which would have been required for them to open an investigation. Instead, they asked them to take them to their field. When they arrived there, a mob of at least 1,500 people had looted the Christians' harvest and proceeded to demand that they renounce their faith or leave the village. The police subsequently left the area without offering further assistance.

On November 19, the Chhattisgarh Christian Forum approached the Sukma district collector and superintendent of police, who then ordered that an FIR be registered. However, this was not actioned until November 21.

Around 40 villagers from eight families whose fields were looted moved away from their land.

(Source: CSW)



## Holding on to Jesus in the face of heartless brutality

***On a recent trip to Egypt Jack Norman heard how converts to Christ are suffering at the hands of family members yet are standing firm in their faith***

**C**oming to faith in Christ is a life-changing moment for all of us. We rejoice in the forgiveness of our sin and the hope of salvation. However, for new believers in Egypt who leave Islam behind to follow Jesus it is life changing in another profound way.

They are frequently rejected by parents and siblings, who feel their

conversion has brought shame on the family, and are made to suffer for their new faith – often in cruel and brutal ways.

When her family became aware that she was following Christ, ‘Ayesha’\* was kidnapped by her brother, along with two of her four daughters, who were just eight and nine years old at the time.

For three days they were held without food as her brother tried to force her to recant her new faith. After three days he gave them a meal, but he made them eat it off the floor. Our partner told me: *‘This is a disrespectful action. It’s telling them: “You will not eat normally, like us. You will eat off the floor like the animals. And why do you have to do this? Because your mother left Islam to become a Christian. So you are equal to an animal. You are not equal to a human.”’*

But this wasn’t the end of their suffering. At one point the brother boiled a kettle and poured the scalding water on his sister’s body.



*In a society where commitment to Islam and attendance at the mosque are seen as fundamental, converting to Christianity carries huge risks*  
Stock photo

*'She told us she couldn't even put her underwear on because of the severity of the burns.'*

He came back every day for three weeks, pushing her to recant and turn back to Islam but she refused, saying, *'I love Jesus and He will come and protect me from you.'*

Even more shockingly her uncle turned up one day and beat the two girls with a stick, breaking the younger one's arm and her sister's leg.

As she watched all this, powerless to intervene, Ayesha felt like she was *'dying'* as she watched her daughters being beaten, *'all because of my*

*decision to become a Christian.'*

The girls were crying and shouting in front of their mother because of the pain but for three days the children were denied medicine, hospital treatment or indeed any help at all.

Although this Christian woman is no longer suffering such extreme abuse, she remains with the family because the only way she can get away from them is to leave her children behind – a price she is not willing to pay.

### ***'More than 30 people were in the room waiting for me'***

Another convert recalled how a few days after telling his wife that he had become a believer in Jesus she had asked him to pick her up from her parents' house, but when he arrived there he found the whole family waiting for him.

*'I walked in and all the family were there; more than 30 people were in the room waiting for me. My wife turned on a recording device on which she had recorded my testimony. They all stood there listening.'*

He was then asked by the family to sign papers giving up his right to his children, home, car and bank account. He had to leave the house with just the clothes on his back, not knowing where he would sleep that night. At the same time he did not know whether he would ever see his children again nor be able to access his bank account and be able to carry on working.

Later on his wife divorced him and he found himself in great debt as he could not pay the necessary court fees. However, our partners were able to help him with the finance and also to get legal assistance to close the case. Without that support to pay the debt he would have faced imprisonment.

Thanks to our partners people such as this man can still find fellowship and support, both spiritual and practical, as well as help to overcome trauma.

And, while the cost can be high, we

hear many testimonies of how God is using our partners to help sustain those who come to faith.

There is also, say our partners, greater freedom to share the gospel than in the UK. While believers here can shy away from proclaiming their faith if they get negative responses, in Egypt Christians have already accepted that it will cost them, so nothing holds them back.

\*Name changed to protect identity

## **PRAY**

- For Release International partners in Egypt as they share the gospel and disciple those who are coming to faith
- For protection and strength for our partners and for those who are accepting Christ
- That the persecutors would come to faith and repentance



Stock photo / Alexa Abacha

## **HOW RELEASE INTERNATIONAL HELPS IN EGYPT**

- **Practical help for marginalised Christians in Upper Egypt who are trapped in poverty**
- **Equipping and discipling new believers**
- **Helping to strengthen the faith and resilience of deprived and vulnerable Christian women**



'N' is one of many Sudanese who have come to Christ in Egypt © 2025 Release International

# Finding faith in a foreign land

## *God is at work among Sudanese refugees in Egypt*

**T**hree years ago I met 'N', a Sudanese refugee, in the centre of Cairo. We sat on a bench and chatted about why he had fled his country.

He told me that he had been in a protest when government forces had opened fire on them, and that his best friend who was next to him had been shot dead. This incident, along with what he saw militants such as ISIS doing, caused him great concern. *'This isn't my beautiful Islam,'* he told me. *'They are destroying it.'*

He showed me his phone, on which he had downloaded several copies of the Bible, and as we parted I placed my hand on his shoulder and told him that I believed his life had been

spared by God to give him more opportunity to come to know Jesus.

On my recent visit to Egypt in September, I showed our partners a picture of 'N' and asked if they had been able to stay in contact with him. They told me that they had, and that just a few months ago he had become a believer and was now being disciplined by them!

'N' is just one of the many Sudanese refugees who have found faith in Egypt. In fact so great is the number that another of our partners has established a separate ministry team simply to provide them with practical help and to share the gospel with them.

**Jack Norman**

# The church of the martyrs

*Egyptian believers' hope in the face of death is inspirational, writes Jack Norman*

In the introduction to his 2014 book, *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God Is Drawing Muslims Around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ*, David Garrison wrote that *'something is happening today that is challenging the hold that Islam exercises over its adherents. Muslim movements to Jesus Christ are taking place in numbers we've never seen before.'*

In the ten years since then, during which I have visited Egypt on several occasions, I can say that Egypt is no exception to this, with increasing numbers coming to faith in Christ each year.

However, this comes at a cost. In a country where Christians have been oppressed for many centuries and continue to be, no group of believers suffer more than those who come from a Muslim background.

While the state may place some practical limitations on those who turn away from Islam, the predominant source of their persecution comes from their families and communities.

Yet, despite this, I continue to be inspired by their steadfast resilience and that of more traditional Egyptian Christians.

February 12, 2025, will be the tenth anniversary of the

beheading of 20 Christian men from Egypt alongside a Ghanaian, killed by ISIS militants on a beach in Libya. In a macabre video put out by the terrorists showing their executions, these men all met their death with the name of Jesus on their lips. This killing was an act which rightly horrified people across the world, but in his book, *The 21: A journey into the land of Coptic martyrs*, Martin Mosebach encountered an alternative view from some of those he spoke with in Egypt who knew the men and their background.

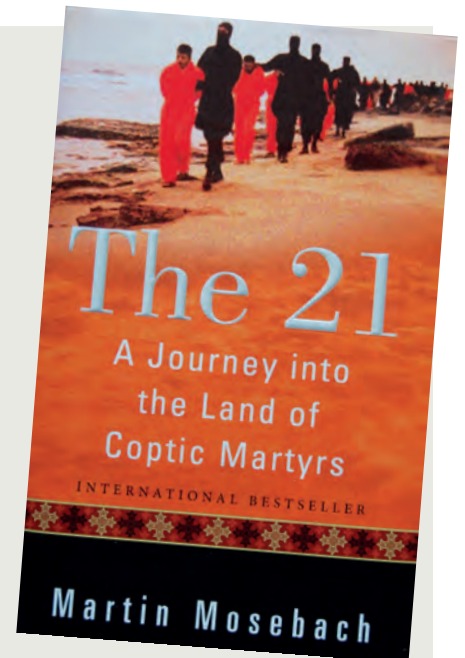
When he met with the bishop responsible for the villages they came from, Mosebach was asked why he wanted to meet their families. *'Why do you want to meet these people? Do not expect too much. They are all the same. You can visit any Coptic family, and you will find the same attitude towards the church, everywhere – the same strong faith, and the same readiness for martyrdom. This is not a Western church in a Western society. We are the church of the martyrs.'*

I heard similar words from a woman I spoke to when I visited a church that had been the target of a bomb attack in 2016. She had lost a loved one in the explosion, but, even as she told me of her grief, she said, *'They have received their reward. They are with their Lord whom they loved and served all their lives. They are free now of the troubles in this life.'*

The '21' and those killed in the church bombing are just some of the more recent in a long line of Egyptian martyrs.

No doubt others will follow, whether it is in larger-scale attacks or individuals killed by their relatives or neighbours, and we will grieve for them, but we should also draw inspiration from them. They point us to the truth of Jesus's words when He told those who would follow Him: *'I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.'* (John 16:33)

Those who laid down their lives on the beach in Libya died speaking



*The 21 tells the story of the Christians martyred in Libya in 2015*

the name of Jesus. The one who has overcome the world was there with them, strengthening them to the end. They have received their reward; they have overcome.

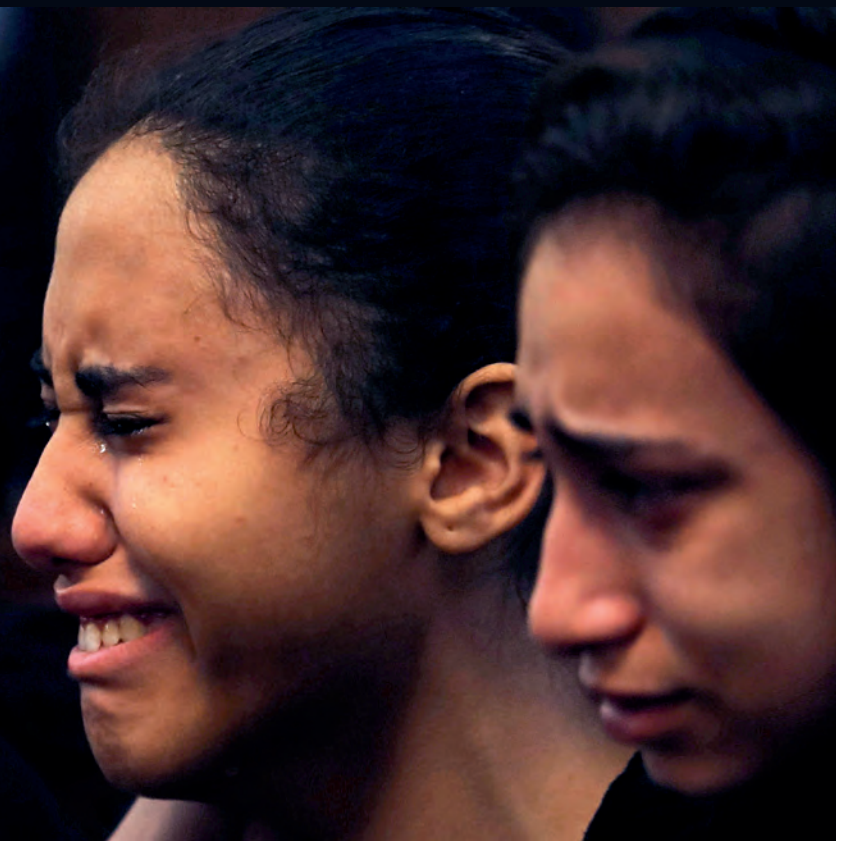
• ***The 21: A journey into the land of Coptic martyrs* is available from our website e-store**

## PLEASE HELP OPPRESSED CHRISTIANS

**In Egypt and around the world today Christians face hostility from a number of different sources: militant groups, hostile authorities and even local communities and families.**

**Your gift can bring encouragement, pastoral care and practical support to our precious sisters and brothers in Christ.**

**Please make a gift today by using the enclosed form, calling 01689 823491 or giving online at [releaseinternational.org](http://releaseinternational.org).**






## Modern-day 'Job' perseveres despite traumatic loss

*On a visit to Nigeria Release International's Alex Smythe spoke to Christians who have suffered unimaginable horrors yet continue in their faith. Here one believer shares his powerful story*

**H**ow do you carry on after losing your wife, parents and all but one of your children – not to mention your home and all your possessions – in one brutal attack on your community?

It doesn't bear thinking about, and thankfully we in the UK do not face that threat. However, it is all too common in northern and central Nigeria where for two decades Islamist terrorists such as Boko Haram and now more recently



*Luka Abba struggles with his feelings towards his family's killers but scripture helps him to overcome*

consequences of the violence: when we met him he was awaiting further surgery. (At the time of writing, our partner had been trying to secure the necessary treatment but it is either too expensive or not easily available in Nigeria.)

### ***'The attack started on my house!'***

Luka, a member of the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) and a resident of Kagoro village in the Kaura local government area, described what happened that evening in February 2022; how he had gone for a stroll with others from the congregation when the attack occurred.

*'We went out and left our families at home but before we knew it we started hearing gunshots. When we called home we heard that it was my community that was under attack – and the attack had started on my house!'*

*'Fulani herdsmen came and surrounded our community with their pick-up trucks and motorbikes. They surrounded my compound and started firing. (We stay in the same compound with different houses as an extended family.) They killed my wife and my children, burnt my father to ashes and killed my mother.'*

*'And then destroyed everything because I was into farming – ginger farming production.'*

Luka is a major ginger grower in the community and even provided loans to empower local small business owners.

When he arrived home he discovered exactly what had happened to his family. Only Magnificent had survived but he was in desperate need of medical attention.

Luka picked up his son and carried him on his back to the nearest clinic – an ECWA dispensary where the boy received first aid – but *'his facial injuries were beyond what they could medically handle'*.

While there Luka was told that animals had started to tamper with the dead bodies of his family, which he had had to leave in the

village. Eventually he was able to find someone to help him move the corpses to a hospital mortuary.

Meanwhile Magnificent was referred to the national hospital in the capital, Abuja, but medical staff there said that his injuries were too severe and could not be treated in Nigeria.

*'They asked if I had money to fly out with the boy but I had nothing. Everything had been destroyed. Even now I haven't reactivated my bank accounts because all my documents and information were burnt. I didn't have enough money.'*

*'As God would have it, though, I managed to get the money and we saw the consultant who said we couldn't stay in the national hospital because it was too expensive. He knew that I had been through a lot and promised to look for another hospital in his capacity as a consultant.'*

Eventually he referred Magnificent to the Federal Medical Centre in Nasarawa state, where the surgery took place. The doctor was able to carry out the operation by connecting online for guidance from colleagues overseas.

Today Magnificent remains under strict medical supervision. He has facial disfigurement and his mouth has to be wired up until there has been sufficient healing. If the wires cannot be removed they will need to be serviced and cleaned regularly to prevent infection.

*'Recently we went back for a check-up and they asked us to prepare so they can perform [more] surgery. There were so many complications including the skin around his mouth being deformed.'*

### ***'Everybody was traumatised'***

On top of having to care for his son, Luka is dealing with his own trauma from that terrible night in which a number of communities were attacked and around 30 people killed. Thankfully Release International's partner, Stefanos Foundation, has been able to help him practically with clothing, food and accommodation as

militant Fulani herdsmen have been terrorising Christians.

For Luka Abba, a Christian from the southern part of Kaduna state in northwest Nigeria there is no choice but to keep going for the sake of his one surviving child, Magnificent, who is living with the physical trauma of having been shot in the mouth.

Somehow the boy survived the raid in February 2022 in which his siblings, mother and grandparents were killed but he lives with the



*Magnificent remains under strict medical supervision*

well as providing trauma counselling. As I speak to Luka it's clear that there is no doubt in his mind that the Fulani attacks were religiously motivated.

*'It is an Islamic agenda because it is only Christians who were killed and churches burnt. If they find a Muslim house within the community they will not touch it – and they will not touch any of their families. They allow the Muslims to leave and attack the Christians.'*

*'They claim that the land in the communities is for them to graze their cows on so they are asking the farmers*

*to leave the communities for them to be grazing there, which of course the people and the communities don't accept.'*

After the attack on Kagoro, the villagers fled to a camp for the internally displaced. *'Everybody was traumatised,'* said Luka.

Like other believers the events of that night had a huge impact on his faith; he questioned how God could have allowed this to happen to His children.

*'I began to wonder but the story that kept me, that helped me the most, was*

*the story of Job, and I later named myself "Job of the Millennium" because of what happened to me. I came to a point where I reminded myself that I didn't come into this world with anything, but, if I can touch anyone's life while I am here and help them, that is what I must do. I believe that is why God spared my life.'*

Inevitably Luka struggles with his feelings towards those responsible for killing his wife, Nancy, his children Sofia and Hope and his parents as well as injuring Magnificent, who was six years old at the time.

*'The pain is there. Left to myself and if I did not have a faith I would say these people should be destroyed – they are not worthy to live because they are like evil monsters. But as a Christian who reads the Bible I have to turn to Scripture which helps me overcome these thoughts. What I tell myself is: "May the will of God be done over their lives because I can't give God direction over that."'*

He asks for prayer that God would intervene in Nigeria: *'Pray about what we are facing and passing through in Nigeria – and for me and my surviving son personally. Pray that God provides where there is no way for us to take care of our loved ones, and that God would restore peace to the country.'*

• All photos © Release International 2025

## PRAY FOR NIGERIA

- **For an end to the violence against Christians especially in the north**
- **For healing for the injured, bereaved and traumatised**
- **For protection for vulnerable Christian communities and Release International's partners**
- **That God would convict the terrorists of their sin and open their eyes to the gospel**

# PERSECUTION TRENDS 2025

*From the Middle East to Africa, Asia and even Europe, Christians are facing sustained and, in some cases, growing persecution and hostility from militant groups and repressive governments. In this year's annual Persecution Trends report, Release International partners describe how Christians have been treated in the past 12 months and look ahead to the challenges they are likely to face in the coming year*



*Ukrainian Orthodox churches are among those that have been targeted by the Russians*

## EUROPE

### UKRAINE

The persecution of Christians in the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia since the invasion of 2022 has been systematically increasing, said our partners.

*'Only the Moscow Orthodox Church is recognised.. All other Ukrainian churches have been closed down and their buildings seized.*

*'Ukrainian Christians in the occupied territories are obligated to obtain Russian citizenship and re-register their churches under Russian law. They need to sever all connections with churches in other parts of Ukraine, as well as in the West. If not, they will be considered spies. Even praying for Ukraine is criminalised by the Russian regime.'*

In 2023 and last year Ukrainian evangelicals in the occupied territories became underground believers, after 95 per cent of church buildings were seized. Christians met in small groups

in homes but when these were raided some were detained and others deported.

Our partners expect that in 2025 Christians in the occupied territories will remain under pressure to obtain Russian citizenship but believers will carry on meeting in small groups, which is unlawful and makes them vulnerable to arrest. It is possible the Russians will try to create show churches, controlled by the Federal Security Service (FSB), to provide an impression of freedom of worship in the Ukrainian areas they control. Meanwhile underground church leaders will be harassed, threatened with arrest, beatings and deportation. Their lives may also be at risk.

*'The majority of Ukrainian Christians have already fled the occupied territories. Those who remain will have to choose between becoming Russian citizens, which may allow them some freedom to function in the FSB-controlled churches, or staying true to*

*their original calling and continuing underground. If they [choose the latter], they will face increasing pressure. Basically, all forms of harassment and persecution may be expected because the Russian regime will not tolerate any form of Ukrainian Christianity in their territories.'*

### **'The war has a strong religious component'**

Our partners added: *'The war has a strong religious component. [Vladimir] Putin is building his regime, working hand in hand with the Moscow Orthodox Church through which he wants to control the hearts and minds of citizens. He has already achieved this goal in Russia itself.*

*'Ukrainian Christians have no doubt that in each city and village taken by Russians freedom of worship will be over and they will have to go underground. Some of our key partners said that, if captured by the Russians, they would be killed.'*

## SOUTH ASIA



### INDIA

India saw growing persecution of Christians in 2024 which, said our partners, was expected to continue.

One partner said that believers were about to enter 2025 with *'fear and anxiety'* although at the same time added, *'but we trust the Lord'*.

During the past 12 months Christians witnessed the physical and emotional abuse and harassment of pastors and other believers, including women and children, across the country but particularly in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Karnataka states.

Persecution also manifested itself in the destruction of church buildings, notably in Manipur, Rajasthan, Telangana and Uttar Pradesh; false imprisonment, especially in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh; and the filing of false police cases and prohibition of home prayer meetings nationwide.

Our partner believes that the increase in persecution has been fuelled by key factors: retaliation by Hindu extremists against losses for the ruling BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) in May's



*Election losses for the BJP has been cited as one of the factors fuelling increased Christian persecution*

general election; the growing political power of the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and a lack of understanding internationally of Hindutva (an ideology that seeks to make Hinduism dominant in India), showing itself in continued foreign support for Modi.

Another partner pointed to the impact of the expansion of anti-conversion laws across India.

*'Nationwide it is estimated that 3,000 Christian leaders and pastors are held in various jails under these charges,'* it said. *'The persecution is steadily increasing and becoming more severe, largely due to the policies of the current Government.'* In one region, it said, church leaders were *'constantly in fear'*

### ***'Already restrictions are increasing'***

According to partners, the expected rise in persecution in 2025 is likely to include the confiscation of Bibles; the continued rape and killing of Christian women and children; the ongoing prohibition of home meetings of Christians – not just worship services, but prayer meetings, and even house warmings and birthday parties; and the continued use of government-sponsored hotlines to inform on Christian neighbours. Christians' homes and villages may face destruction with many forced to flee.



*'Already restrictions are increasing, with some Christians barred from doing business, travelling on public transport or even drawing water from village wells.'*

It is feared that there will be more arrests and imprisonments, more Christians being displaced from their homes and even martyrdom.

Another partner suggests Christians may face restrictions on certain foods, while pointing to reports it had received that the Government 'may soon declare Sunday a working day, affecting church attendance and worship'.



*Since it took control in 2021 the Taliban has imposed more restrictions on Afghans*

## AFGHANISTAN

Christians are facing growing persecution in Afghanistan because, since the Taliban took over in 2021, they have been imposing Sharia (Islamic law) in greater areas of life, said our partners.

*'Christians face ... social, economic, religious and physical persecution. Lots of Afghans are fleeing to Pakistan, Iran and other countries, because they are afraid that, as soon as their Christian faith is disclosed, they might be persecuted or killed.'*

*'According to [the Taliban's] Sharia, conversion to any other religion is an offence, punishable by death.'*

As a result, any Christian who shares their faith with a neighbour could face serious consequences.

Our partners said: *'In our region in 2025, we expect to see more arrests and imprisonments, more Christians martyred for their faith [or] being either displaced or forced to flee their homes.'*

## SRI LANKA

While physical attacks on Christians in Sri Lanka are declining, legal restrictions are on the rise and intensifying, said our partner.

*'In the coming year, Christians are likely to face heightened challenges stemming from restrictive laws and regulations, particularly those enforcing mandatory registration for churches. Based on current trends, these legal measures are expected to increasingly hinder church activities, making it harder for smaller,*

*independent churches to gather and operate openly.'*

It anticipates a rise in church closures, as authorities impose legal restrictions, such as mandatory registration, to curtail Christian gatherings and activities.

*'Additionally, Hindu extremist groups are gaining influence in the northern, eastern and central provinces, primarily targeting Christian evangelistic work under the pretext of opposing conversions. These groups have been systematically campaigning against Christian outreach efforts, often in collaboration with extremist Buddhist monks who also view conversions as a threat.'*

It added: *'Legal restrictions have proven highly effective in curbing church activities. These measures tend to draw less public attention despite their substantial impact, making them the preferred tool of suppression.'*

In 2024, our partner documented 42 incidents of religious liberty violations against Christians, predominantly involving threats, intimidation, coercion and discrimination. Additionally, incidents of property damage, online hate campaigns and physical violence were reported. The main perpetrators included local state officials, Buddhist monks and extremist Hindu groups.

## PAKISTAN

Persecution in Pakistan is increasing gradually, said one of our partners. Or, as another described it, *'it's increasing day by day'*, not helped by the conflict in the Middle East. Christians are seen by many in Pakistan as pro-Israeli so *'they want to take revenge by killing Christians in Pakistan'*. At the same time instability in the Government during the past five years has allowed extremism to grow.

*'As Christians, we always have to be mindful of how someone may perceive our message when we are talking [about Christ].'*

They said that, due to the rise of extremist religious political parties, there had been an increase in hatred towards Christians. *'If someone gets to*

know about a Christian's faith identity, they immediately start mistreating them.'

They expect many Christians to suffer in the coming year. 'Currently there is a trend of killing the accused before their arrest because people have become their own law enforcers. Due to this, many Christian families are constantly trying to flee their homes and migrate to safer areas, but they are always in danger.'

### **'The mere accusation of blasphemy can put you at risk of physical harm'**

They said that as a result of the rise of religious political parties, more people were becoming passionate about taking someone else's life in the name of religion. Younger people were being radicalised at madrasas (Islamic schools), while militants were getting trained in how to file complaints against Christians.

*'Young Muslims are being taught and trained as extremists. This ideology is increasing hatred, discrimination and persecution against Christians in Pakistan.'*

In 2024, religious minorities, especially Christians, continued to face persecution in various forms – social, political and religious – ranging from blasphemy accusations and forced conversions to mob killings and destruction of places of worship. Christians also faced discrimination in education and in employment.

Our partner said that believers were living with the fear of being accused of blasphemy. *'All Christians at work, schools, offices, churches and even at home are not safe. They are scared of false accusations at any time by anyone. The mere accusation of blasphemy can put you at risk of physical harm.'*

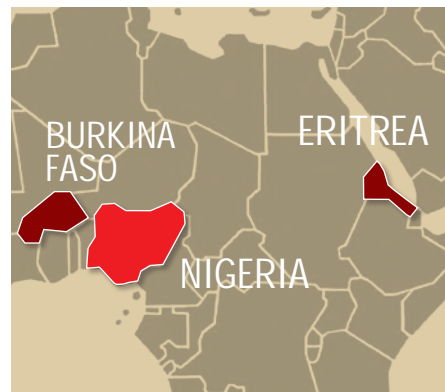
Moreover, there have been multiple cases of abduction, forced conversion, sexual abuse and religious discrimination.

Our partners, who have helped to defuse tensions in local communities, thereby potentially saving many lives, fear that in 2025 Christians will continue to be falsely accused of

blasphemy (sometimes to destroy a Christian's business) and forced to flee. The rise of extremism will lead to more arrests and imprisonments and even martyrdom.

*'If this mob culture is not [dealt with], we are likely to face more cases of false blasphemy, mob lynching, discrimination and forced conversions,'* said our partners.

## AFRICA



### NIGERIA

The violent persecution of Christians in Nigeria is on the rise and looks set to continue into 2025, said our partners, Stefanos Foundation.

Radicalised Fulani herdsmen are *'on the rampage, killing Christians and over-running their communities in order to grab their land with impunity, especially in the middle belt of Nigeria'*, it said.

*'The rise in the number of Islamic extremist groups operating in Nigeria like Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Fulani militant herdsmen and Fulani bandit sects has led to unprecedented violence against Christians. They have been operating unhindered and gaining more territories not only in northern Nigeria but also in the southern region.'*

Stefanos expects this trend to continue in 2025.

*'Nigeria has been recognised as one of the most dangerous places to be a Christian with over 8,000 Christians*



Armed Fulani herdsmen have terrorised Christian communities

*reportedly killed in 2023 alone because of their faith.*

*'And over four million refugees, mostly Christian farmers, have been displaced due to violence (ADF International, 2024). Christians in Nigeria are to expect more violence, death, kidnappings and displacement in 2025.'*

Stefanos pointed to the implementation of Sharia (Islamic law) by 12 northern states, which had resulted in a *'huge number of Christians experiencing threats, intimidation, marginalisation and discrimination almost daily'*.

It said Christians were likely to experience more discrimination in employment, education and access to resources especially in northern Nigeria.

*'Christians may face targeted violence and death from terrorist groups, forced marriages and coerced conversion of Christians especially women, teenage girls and children. Those who survive attacks may end up displaced and severely impoverished.'*

### BURKINA FASO

In 2024 Christians suffered many forms of persecution, notably violent attacks from armed groups, death threats and forced expulsion from their villages.

According to local NGOs and the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa, approximately 25 per cent of attacks in the northern and eastern regions of the country specifically targeted Christian communities, causing the displacement of thousands of people.



Rural Christian communities are particularly vulnerable to attack in Burkina Faso

And this persecution of Christians is increasing, according to the analysis of many sources and trends observed in the region. The rise is mainly due to the growing power of jihadists active in the immediate, sub-Saharan belt across Africa known as the Sahel, who directly target Christian communities. Rural areas, where Christians are often minorities, are particularly vulnerable.

In addition, the deterioration in infrastructure and the growing inability of the state to provide security in these regions exacerbate the problem. It is feared that, without more intervention, the pressure on Christians will only increase in the years ahead. The strengthening of these armed extremist groups and the political instability render the protection of Christians more difficult.

Jihadists seek not only to control the territory, but also to eradicate non-Islamic religious practices, particularly Christianity.

This means that multiple pressures are looming for Christians in 2025. The extremists' violence is likely to continue – and may intensify in the north, east, Sahel and Boucle (central west) regions – leading to the forced displacement of increasing numbers to camps in urban

areas where they may be isolated and without access to a stable means of livelihood. According to multiple sources, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) continues to increase each year, in particular among rural Christian communities.

This climate of fear and economic marginalisation will put Christians' means of survival to the test and may continue to restrain their freedom to practise their beliefs.

## ERITREA

Our partner, Dr Berhane Asmelash of Release Eritrea, said that persecution intensified in 2024 and unless the Eritrean Government changed its policy in 2025, which was unlikely, more Christians would be arrested and mistreated.

*'We believe it is a desperate attempt to control the growth of the evangelical population in the country. During the past 20 years the number has grown exponentially in spite of the harsh treatment of Christians.'*

*'We are expecting more arrests and severe punishment and torture of Christians. The prison food is inedible but food and medicine are not officially allowed to be taken to Christian*



Berhane Asmelash

*prisoners. That is the reason many Christians die inside the prison.'*

Dr Asmelash said the total number of believers in prison was more than 400; half of these had been arrested during the past two years. *'If the current trend continues as it is now, we are expecting more arrests and possible martyrdom.'*

He said that many of the recently arrested Christians were families that included children and nursing mothers. *'About 56 of them have been taken to labour camps on government farms in western Eritrea. For many it is their second or third time of arrest.'*

## EASTERN ASIA



### CHINA

Persecution of Christians in China is increasing and continues to be at its worst level since the Cultural Revolution, said our partners.

This is because of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policy of 'sinicization' which seeks to infiltrate churches with communist ideology and 'Xi Jinping Thought', making Christianity more palatable to the Government, with the end goal of assimilation. In practice this means preaching and promoting doctrines that support and comply with the CCP's leadership, ideology and values.

As a result there will be ongoing pressures in 2025 to conform to a surveillance state intent on reducing the growth and influence of the church.

The year ahead is likely to result in increased arrests and imprisonments. Christians are not being directly martyred for their faith, although some may die as a result of not being able to cope physically or mentally with imprisonment and torture. Reports of Christians leaving China, including pastors who fear being blacklisted and therefore prevented from travelling, are likely to continue.



President Xi Jinping continues to seek religious 'sinicization' in China

### NORTH KOREA

Persecution of Christians always remains high in North Korea, said our partner, Voice of the Martyrs Korea (VOMK).

This is because the Government regards religion as a tool that foreign powers use to colonize other countries.

VOMK said that more citizens in North Korea were forming negative opinions about the Government because of the lack of official support people received during the Covid crisis. Due to this, the state had intensified its crackdown on signs of foreign influence, including religion, among civilians. Tightening border security had also been one of the main ways in which Pyongyang had sought to limit external influence.

*'During Covid, officials were less inclined to carry out detailed house searches out of a concern for contracting the disease, so Christians were able to make good use of this opportunity to [move materials around] or, in some cases, even to meet. Christians may face increased pressures as strict monitoring procedures return or even exceed past levels.'*

VOMK said it was likely that more Christians will be arrested, imprisoned, martyred and displaced due to technological developments and an increase in North Korea's general crackdown on foreign influences in 2025. It was also likely that North Korean believers living in China will be arrested, imprisoned, and displaced, but not that they would be martyred, although *'they may be sent back to North Korea where they could be martyred'*.

It said the Chinese Government had become increasingly active in repatriating North Korean defectors who were looking to flee to South Korea. However, it seems that local officials have been working to provide documentation and residency status to defectors who had settled in China, as long as they engaged in religious activities only amongst themselves, making sure especially not to associate with foreigners or ethnically Korean-Chinese citizens.



## CENTRAL ASIA

The intensity of the persecution of Christians in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Karakalpakstan (an autonomous region within Uzbekistan), Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan is expected to remain broadly unchanged in 2025, said our partner.

Christians will continue to face fines for taking their children to church and for holding meetings illegally (since they lack state registration). And only in isolated cases (in places where Christians have developed good relations with local authorities) will the situation be more normal.

*'Although these countries have secular constitutions, in reality, the level of Islamic influence continues to grow, inspired by political, economic and financial pressure from states such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan.'*

Radical groups linked with the governments can also stir up local opposition to Christians.

Another driver of hostility towards

Christians in general and evangelicals in particular in these states closely connected to Russia is Moscow's position that, unless churches are Russian Orthodox, they are 'agents of western countries' and their pastors are 'American spies'.

In 2024 there were no reported cases of severe persecution of the type seen in previous years but many Christians had been subjected to ridicule, threats of arson and even murder as well as facing large fines.

## SOUTHEAST ASIA

### MALAYSIA

*'It is our sincere opinion that the persecution has increased, but due to fear and threats most is kept silent and does not come to public attention,'* said our partners.

The reason for this increased persecution is that Malaysia wants to officially become an Islamic nation and therefore needs to have a majority Muslim population, they added.

They believe that in 2025 the strongest pressure will come in the area of business. Companies registered in Malaysia must have a Muslim as a partner (51 per cent); and to obtain a *halal* certification costs significantly more for non-Muslims. So to avoid higher costs and taxes, many are converting to Islam.

Christian businesses that are unable to secure the loans or licences they need to operate will be forced to close.

At the same time, hatred towards Christians was *'increasing on a regular basis and the violence is not being investigated or ever comes to court.'*

Converts are continuously the target of the authorities and face loss of employment, rejection from family and community and even imprisonment.

Our partners said: *'There are thousands of Muslims in Malaysia who accepted Christ as Lord, but due to Sharia they cannot go [openly] to church and are forced to stay in hiding and meet in house churches.'*



## MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

### IRAN

Iranian converts, particularly ministry workers and leaders, are expected to face increasing pressures in 2025, said one of our partners working in the country.

*'The very fear of persecution is a worry as believers meeting in house groups do not know if they are under surveillance or not. These pressures have led to an exodus of some believers [and ministry] workers from Iran (mainly to Turkey) and this exodus is likely to continue in 2025.'*

*'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 allow only Christian minority groups to operate. Longer prison sentences are being given to some Christian workers [although] some workers have been released.'* Others are on bail awaiting trial.

There is no doubt that the Government is concerned by those becoming Christians and as such is unwilling to acknowledge converts' rights. Last year Christians involved in any form of ministry were particularly targeted.

*'Thankfully 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 – [but] 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.'*

The demonstrations of 2022-23 under the banner of 'Woman, Life, Freedom' were suppressed but the ongoing controls, repression and increased surveillance only add pressure on believers, house churches and Christian activity.

*'It will interesting to see if the new President, Masoud Pezeshkian, who is a reformist politician, can bring about any meaningful changes and show a greater level of tolerance.'*

### **'Christians are an easy target'**

Another partner working with Iranian Christians in Turkey said: *'In Turkey the rate [of persecution] appears to have been steadily increasing over the past couple of years. This seems to have occurred primarily as a policy of the Turkish authorities to reduce the number of refugees, but the increased Islamist profile adds a specific dimension against Christians.'*

Many Iranian refugees who have been living in Turkey for years are finding it increasingly difficult to remain and some are facing deportation back to Iran.

*'Christians, especially those identified as coming from a Muslim background, are an easy target, both with "informal" local persecution when*

# PERSECUTION TRENDS 2025

*being stopped by authority figures and also when put through the legal system.'*

These pressures in Turkey are likely to remain in the coming year, while in Iran itself, the focus may continue to be much more on the risk of escalating conflict with Israel. Christians there, often painted by the authorities as agents of the West, were at risk of detention and being held as scapegoats in the event of any perceived catastrophic action, said our partners.

## EGYPT

Christians in Egypt have faced numerous waves of persecution over the years, often supported by political authorities.

'In recent times and with the current Government, we are very thankful that such support is absent. Nonetheless, everyday experiences still involve milder forms of persecution, including discrimination and tensions between Christian and Muslim families and individuals, especially in isolated villages. Disputes can frequently escalate into religious confrontations,' said our partner.

Furthermore, numerous individuals have been forced to leave their homes due to persecution and move to remote areas. Women and girls are subjected to continuous harassment, abuse and persecution; some are drawn into romantic relationships or offered financial rewards to embrace Islam.

There is also religious-based discrimination in appointments to government jobs but instances of discrimination and religious conflict are most common in smaller villages and rural areas.

Our partner said: 'Sharia-based personal status laws comprise a set of regulations that regulate familial relationships. These laws address critical areas such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and financial support,

*Gendarmes seal shut the doors of a church in Algeria*



*playing an important role in clarifying the rights and duties of family members. Christians may experience various challenges when dealing with these matters.'*

## IRAQ

In 2025 Christians in the Middle East, including Iraq, are likely to face ongoing pressures, particularly due to their minority status and the region's complex political and social dynamics, said our partners.

With a total Christian population of around 250,000, which includes about 10,000 evangelicals, believers will continue to experience societal discrimination, limited job opportunities and restrictions on religious gatherings. And as regional tensions persist and extremist elements remain active, Christians may face threats to their personal safety, targeted violence and vandalism of churches and other properties.

Additionally, the pressure to convert or conform to the dominant religious beliefs may increase, particularly for evangelical and other minority Christian groups. This will likely drive more individuals to seek refuge outside the region.

In 2025, while killings specifically due to faith are unlikely, Christians will still face serious risks. In Iraq, as a Muslim-majority nation, social pressures and local hostilities often force Christians, especially converts, to flee their homes to seek safety elsewhere.

*'Although arrests or imprisonments may not be a primary concern, we expect a continued influx of Christian refugees and displaced individuals, driven by*

*social rejection and threats.'*

In 2024 persecution of Christians in the region appeared to increase marginally at most, but the ongoing instability and social pressures meant that Christians, particularly converts, continued to face threats. Many, including those seeking visas for the West, had been forced to remain in the region for extended periods.

## ALGERIA

The persecution of Christians in Algeria is expected to be largely unchanged in 2025, said our partners.

The authorities continue to close churches and convict Christian leaders for holding unauthorised worship. In September and October 2024 three leaders were summoned to court.

The Government does not want to formalise the registration of the Protestant church in Algeria, along with other Christian organisations, so in 2025 believers are likely to face legal challenges and harassment from the security services; disciplinary hearings and dismissal of Christian workers in the public sector and in education; interrogation, harassment and searches at ports and airports; and bureaucratic hold-ups at every level.

Our partner expects *'an increase in pressure on indigenous Christians. There is a risk that Christians will leave Algeria in large numbers or be obliged to move within the country.'*

The political change that has taken place since December 2019 has driven several church leaders to flee abroad, but others have stayed behind to stand in solidarity with the Christian community in Algeria.



Volunteer Laurie on his Isle of Man fundraising walk



Stock photo

## Partners inspire at national event

A big thank you to everyone who joined us for our National Supporters and Volunteers' Conference (previously called Annual Volunteers' Conference) in November. We had around 150 people attending online to hear about the inspiring work that our partner, Operation Hope, is doing in Egypt and the work of another partner, Dr Berhane Asmelash and Release Eritrea.

Hosted by Release International CEO Paul Robinson, the event had been planned to be an in-person event live-streamed from St Nicholas Church, Sevenoaks, but was subsequently moved online. We are so grateful for everyone's understanding of the late change and especially want to thank St Nicholas Church for their kindness and support.

- Thank you to everyone who took the time to complete our **Supporter Survey**. We value and appreciate your responses, which will help us better to serve persecuted believers around the world.

## Way to go, Laurie!

Despite developing a knee injury Release International volunteer Laurie was able to complete a 100-mile coastal path walk on the Isle of Man and raise more than £5,000 to help persecuted Christians.

Laurie, from Inverness, was joined on the sponsored walk in October by a friend, while their wives, accompanying them by car, acted as the support team.

The Isle of Man coastal path, called the Way of the Gull, ascends 13,000 feet but thankfully Laurie's injury did not hold him back.

*'My joint issues seemed to improve as the walk progressed and we had great weather for the most part,'* said Laurie.

At the time of writing more than £3,500 had been raised through

JustGiving for trauma-healing workshops in Nigeria run by Release International partners Stefanos Foundation along with more than £1,500 given through the church.

*'The generosity of friends, family and above all the church family has been overwhelming,'* added Laurie.

*'Our Nigerian brothers and sisters are always so grateful that we care for them and pray for them. Thank you all for making this possible.'*

- Huge thanks also to volunteer Ann from Northern Ireland whose coffee and craft day in her home in October raised more than £1,500 to help persecuted Christians. Ann said: *'Kind friends helped out and donated lovely crafts and food. It was very well supported and we were delighted to raise £1,570 to help our persecuted family.'*



## INVITE A SPEAKER

Our team of experienced speakers are available to join your church or online meeting to help you support and pray for persecuted Christians. They would love to hear from you!

**Ireland:**  
Stephen on 028 9334 0014  
or 07933 313169

**London & South:**  
Jonny on 07861 656269

**Central England & Wales:**  
Allister on 07916 396178

**Scotland & North of England:**  
James on 07434 894016

## There is hope even in the cycle of behaviour found in the book of Judges, says Release International's Stephen McIlroy

# Suffering oppression is nothing new for God's people

In Ecclesiastes 1:9 the writer comments that there is nothing new under the sun, which holds true even when it comes to the oppression of God's people throughout history.

A brief glimpse at a historical timeline of the Bible provides ample evidence of repeated and continued oppression. From the time of the patriarchs, through the hostility of living in Egypt, during the influence of the judges, under the rule of the kings, enduring exile in Babylon, after the return and the overshadowing of foreign powers ruling the promised land, right through to the period when the Messiah finally arrived, God's people suffered oppression.

The period of the book of Judges, which lasted for around 450 years, saw the need for a deliverer to save the people from the dark shadow of social and political oppression and so God in His compassion and mercy provided a judge. However, this judge was not considered legal or judicial but was a local Hebrew leader and deliverer (saviour). Behind the oppression was always a long-suffering God who was constantly trying to get the attention of His people. We can see a recurring cycle of events throughout this period, around the 12th century BC:

- The people abandoned worship of Jehovah God alone
- The people were punished by oppressive nations
- The people cry out for help

- The people receive a rescuer (judge) from Jehovah
- The people live in peace for about 40 years
- The people renew their apostasy and abandon Jehovah

A well-known example of this can be seen in the life of Gideon. In Judges 6, an un-named prophet appears when the people of God have endured around 40 years of affliction from the surrounding nation of Midian. This nation did not attempt to take over the land, but chose regularly to raid their neighbours' crops, whenever they desired! The prophet clearly reveals the idolatry of God's people, reminding them of what God has done for them as well as what the people have done to their God. The Hebrews appear regretful (of what they have lost), but not repentant (still idolising and trusting in demonic gods). Even

so, Jehovah God graciously prepares a deliverer (judge).

Unlike the prophet, the judge is named – Gideon, the son of Joash, member of the clan of Abiezer, part of the tribe of Manasseh. God commissions him but Gideon objects. Gideon's reluctance to serve is similar to that of Moses and Jeremiah. However, Jehovah wants to do great things through someone who is not only reluctant but also economically and socially poor, part of a weak clan and within a seemingly non-prominent tribe. Where Gideon sees weakness, God sees potential! Gideon will go on to deliver God's people from oppression, pre-figuring the coming of the ultimate deliverer, saviour and judge – Jesus Christ, the One whom oppressed believers today are crying out to for rescue.

## INSPIRING FAITH



*'It becomes clear as we study the New Testament that persecution is not, nor ever will be, foreign to the church on this earth. Therefore, we have an obligation as members of that body to "encourage one another and build each other up" (1 Thessalonians 5:11) until Christ returns.'*

Pastor Richard Wurmbbrand was imprisoned for 14 years in communist Romania in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1968 he inspired the founding of Release International, which today continues his ministry to serve persecuted Christians around the world in the name of Jesus.



## Simple way to show how much you care

Your regular support enables our partners to provide prayerful, pastoral and practical help to persecuted Christians in around 30 countries.

Regular gifts such as through Direct Debits mean it is so much easier for us and our partners to plan that support, whether it's practical help such as providing food or shelter for Christians forced to flee, help for the families of those who have been imprisoned for their faith and so are unable to provide for their spouse

and children, or counselling for those who have suffered horrific trauma as a result of losing loved ones to violence.

Knowing that the funds are available to meet the needs of their persecuted brothers and sisters is also one less consideration for our partners at a time when they themselves can be challenged by the demands of their ministry.

*'Thank you to everyone who gives to*

*help our persecuted family,'* said Paul Robinson, Release International chief executive. *'Regular giving particularly is very much appreciated. The more we know how much will be available the more we know how much we have to fund the needs of our persecuted brothers and sisters.'*

- **Use the tear-off section of the letter or the Connect and Support card to set up your Direct Debit. Please make sure you include your name and address on the card.**

## Regular support is vital

Regular giving (even small amounts) through a Direct Debit helps us to plan ministry support around the world. It is a great way to show ongoing love and concern for persecuted believers.

*giftaid it*

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Date

**Thank you!**

**Yes, I want to partner with Release International**

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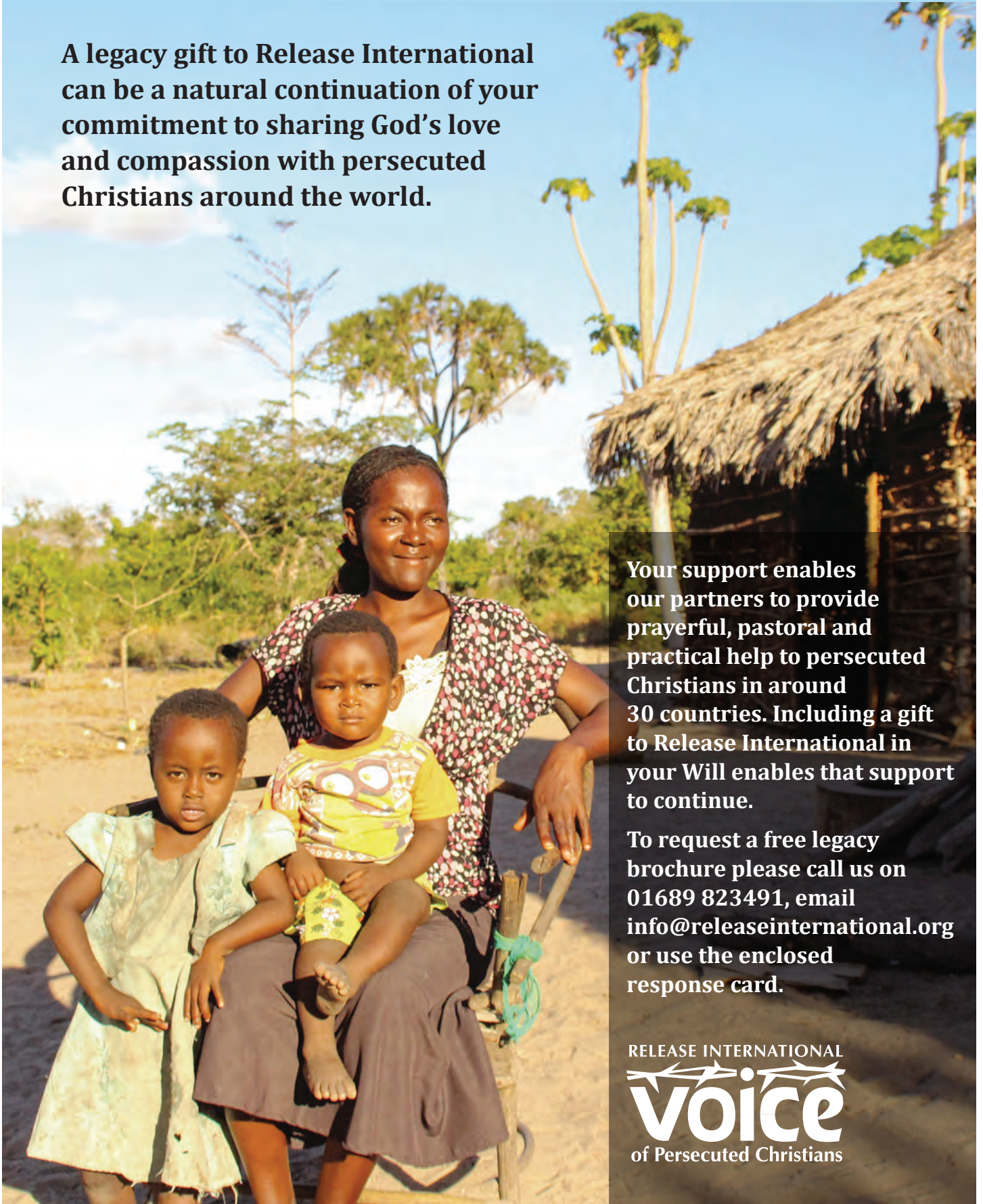
# *Will you leave a legacy of enduring faith and love?*

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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL  
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of Persecuted Christians



# prayershield

Jan-Mar 2025



*Churches in Ukraine are welcoming new believers in the midst of war. Stock photo*

## JANUARY 2025

*Heavenly Father,*

*As this new year begins help me to recommit in prayer for those who are oppressed for the sake of Your Son.*

*May my heart be moved to stand with them in prayer so that they, like the apostle Paul, will be able to testify: 'The Lord stood at my side and gave me strength so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed' (2 Tim 4:17).*

*I pray in Jesus's name for their comfort and restoration, and the advance of Your kingdom even amid violent opposition.*

*Amen*

## UKRAINE

**WEDNESDAY 1:** Pray for Christian leaders who have experienced imprisonment and torture because of their faith. May the Lord bring them healing and restoration.

**THURSDAY 2:** Pray for our partners who are reaching out to Christians in Ukraine. They are seeking to meet the spiritual and psychological needs caused by persecution and war-related trauma.

**FRIDAY 3:** Thank the Lord for the healing experienced through trauma-relief retreats for Christian leaders. Many have lost loved ones and homes and have lived in continual fear and uncertainty, while still seeking

to serve others. One participant said: 'The whole week seemed, in all respects, to be one of rich blessing, refreshment and healing from God. It offered a safe space to unburden the soul from the traumatic experiences of the past years.'

**SATURDAY 4:** Pray for plans to run further trauma-relief retreats for Ukrainian evangelical leaders most affected by persecution and the war with Russia. May there be healing and restoration.

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**SUNDAY 5:** Pray that Pastor 'Alexis' and his wife will be able to receive the care, support and encouragement they need. He, along with others in his team, ministered under Russian occupation despite significant danger.

**MONDAY 6:** Pray for Ukrainian Christians who have been forced to flee, leaving behind their homes, ministries and familiar surroundings. Pray that they would soon settle in their new locations and be encouraged to continue following the Lord.

**TUESDAY 7:** Praise God that churches are being planted and people are turning to Jesus in the midst of war and hostility towards Christians.

## AFGHANISTAN

**WEDNESDAY 8:** Give thanks for Release International's partners, Operation Matthew and Operation Angel, who produce and broadcast Christian content in a range of different media into Afghanistan. Pray that everyone who reads, hears and watches will be impacted by the truth of the gospel.

**THURSDAY 9:** Many Afghans who hear Christian radio programmes want to learn more. However, due to the severe consequences of being exposed, they are wary of getting in touch with our partner's follow-up teams. Pray that they will have courage to make contact.

**FRIDAY 10:** Praise God for one seeker in Afghanistan who said, 'I read the Bible and my eyes were opened to the truth. If other people would read the Bible, they would also understand and believe.'

**SATURDAY 11:** Pray for all those in Afghanistan who have to practise their Christian faith in secret. Pray that God will provide opportunities for fellowship and openings to share their faith with others.

**SUNDAY 12:** Pray for Afghan Christians who have had to flee their homeland because of the threat of severe persecution. Pray that wherever they are, they would be encouraged to continue growing in their faith.

**MONDAY 13:** Thank God for Release International partners in Brazil who welcome Afghan Christians who have been forced to flee. Praise the Lord for the willingness of churches in Brazil to embrace these refugees.

**TUESDAY 14:** Pray for 'Javed' and his family, along with other Afghan Christian refugees, settling into their new life in Brazil, as they adapt to cultural differences, learn a new language and seek suitable work.

## NORTH KOREA

**WEDNESDAY 15:** Pray that the church in North Korea would persevere and multiply, despite the horrific persecution. Anyone discovered to be a Christian or to have expressed any

interest in Christ or the Bible is considered an enemy of the state.

**THURSDAY 16:** Pray for South Korean missionaries who are imprisoned in North Korea for their gospel work. Prisons and labour camps are brutal environments where inmates can be starved, overworked and tortured.

**FRIDAY 17:** Pray for radio engineers responsible for keeping daily gospel broadcasts into North Korea on the air. Pray that many would tune in and respond to the gospel.

**SATURDAY 18:** Pray that the truth of the gospel would penetrate hearts and lives and liberate North Korea from indoctrination and lies.

**SUNDAY 19:** Ask God to work powerfully in North Korea, delivering this nation from its brutal regime. Pray that the officials who persecute Christians would come to faith.

**MONDAY 20:** Thank God for our partners sending Bibles into North Korea. Pray for each Bible that has been sent; that the word of God would accomplish its purpose in each person who receives a copy.

**TUESDAY 21:** Pray for safety for a Christian worker who, at great personal risk, distributes audio Bibles inside North Korea. One Christian woman secretly listens to an audio Bible in her bed every night.

## SOMALIA

**WEDNESDAY 22:** Praise God for five Somali women and seven Somali men who have accepted

Christ in the past few months. Pray for their protection and that they will stand firm in their faith, despite strong opposition from wider family members to return to Islam.

**THURSDAY 23:** Pray for a Somali believer who has recently lost her husband. His death was related to anxiety and depression and has had a big impact on the Somali community, as he was among only a handful of mature Christians.

**FRIDAY 24:** Pray for Somali believers who are battling with depression and anxiety because of persecution and other related life challenges in their journey with the Lord. This is made worse by the lack of freedom to worship which often means only being able to meet in secret locations.

**SATURDAY 25:** Pray for more work opportunities to open up for Somali Christian men and women in the diaspora, who find it difficult to secure employment because of their refugee status.

**SUNDAY 26:** Pray that counselling run by our partners would, by God's grace, strengthen and encourage those who have been adversely affected by persecution, rejection and other challenges.

**MONDAY 27:** Pray for Somali believers who, thanks to our partners, are able to set up small businesses to provide for their daily needs.

**TUESDAY 28:** Thank God for Somali families who are coming to faith in Christ, and pray for



*Luka Abba lost his wife, parents and all but one of his children at the hands of Fulani terrorists*

those who have recently been baptised. Remember too those who are genuinely seeking to know the truth of the gospel.

## NIGERIA

**WEDNESDAY 29:** Pray for Luka Abba whose wife, Nancy, children and parents were all killed by Fulani militants (see *Voice*, page 10)

**THURSDAY 30:** Magnificent, the only surviving child of Luka Abba (see yesterday's prayer), was shot in the mouth during a brutal raid on their home. Pray that he would receive the medical care he needs and for his complete physical and emotional healing.

**FRIDAY 31:** Thank God for the work of Release International partner the Stefanos Foundation, which provides trauma healing for the many Christians such as Luka Abba who have lost family and home.

## FEBRUARY 2025

### SRI LANKA

**SATURDAY 1:** Lift up to God Release International's partners as they minister to believers in Sri Lanka, providing encouragement and support to those who have been persecuted.

**SUNDAY 2:** Pray for God's provision for the many young believers who often do not have enough money to buy books or clothes.

**MONDAY 3:** Praise God for the more than 100 young people who attended our partners' recent 'Kids Camp', where they received healing, restoration and teaching. Pray that at next year's event God would touch all the young people whose lives have been affected by persecution.

**TUESDAY 4:** Pray for the many training camps run by Release International's partners which seek to educate church planters, youth pastors, church leaders and medical workers.

**WEDNESDAY 5:** Praise God for the provision of a motorcycle for Pastor Robert Peter. He has struggled to visit the 150 members of his church but is now able to serve them more effectively.

**THURSDAY 6:** Ask God to grant wisdom and discernment to local church leaders, particularly around the issues of conflict and contested places of religious worship. A recent report shed light on the underlying causes and implications.

**FRIDAY 7:** Praise God for the peacemakers who regularly seek to bring together local community groups. They often meet with Islamic scholars, local Hindus, Christians and officers from the religious institutes. Pray for continued unity, so easily broken by tensions and militants' actions.

## INDIA

**SATURDAY 8:** Pray for the state of Manipur, which has suffered almost two years of continual violence. Many Manipuri Christians are living in relief camps with little medical care, and still suffer drone attacks and intimidation.

**SUNDAY 9:** Pray for the churches of Manipur whose pastors are struggling financially because church members have lost their

livelihoods and are unable to support them.

**MONDAY 10:** Pray for Christians in states such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat, where churches are prohibited from meeting in homes. Threats and intimidation against Christians are frequent. Pray for relief and courage amidst the trials.

**TUESDAY 11:** Pray for pastors who have been physically injured by mobs intent on disrupting their ministry. Pray that their medical treatment will be effective and for courage to continue their ministry in the face of opposition.

**WEDNESDAY 12:** Pray for Pastor D and his team who work in the hill villages of Odisha, supporting remote traditional Christian communities and sharing the good news with their neighbours, many of

whom are aggressively hostile towards Christianity. Ask for God's protection and guidance for this work.

**THURSDAY 13:** Pray for all the pastors and other Christians who have been arrested simply for sharing their faith. Remember particularly those imprisoned without bail who are awaiting a court appearance. Pray for those providing legal support through our partners and that the believers would receive a fair hearing.

**FRIDAY 14:** Pray for our partner's work in distributing Bibles in local languages, especially to those who have never seen or heard the word before. May it bless all who read it and inspire them to share the truth with others.

## PAKISTAN

**SATURDAY 15:** Thank the Lord for our partners who are committed to addressing the dire conditions faced by approximately 1,000 Christians, including 250 children, enduring slave-like conditions working in brick-kiln factories throughout Pakistan.

**SUNDAY 16:** Pray for our partners as they seek to look after the spiritual welfare of the Christians working in brick kilns. Every week a team of pastors gathers together people from two to three factories for a time of worship, teaching and prayer.

**MONDAY 17:** Christians forced to work in brick kilns often experience significant poverty.



*Many Indians are standing with the victims of violence in Manipur. Christians there are still suffering*

Pray for our partners as they seek to help with physical needs, such as basic foods.

**TUESDAY 18:** As a result of generational debt, the only escape for many of the families working in brick kilns is to be redeemed. Ask the Lord to grant our partners wisdom as they seek to discern which families are most in need of being redeemed.

**WEDNESDAY 19:** Pray that Christians who have been redeemed from the brick kilns by our partners will be able to become established and thrive in their new lives. Six families were redeemed last year.

**THURSDAY 20:** Praise God for Kaliq, a Christian who was recently redeemed from labouring in a brick kiln. Please pray for him as he is not able to work due to severe back pain, having been repeatedly beaten by the owner of the factory.

**FRIDAY 21:** Please pray that more Christians would become involved in helping believers living in slavery in the brick kilns of Pakistan.

## IRAQ

**SATURDAY 22:** Our partner in Kurdistan praises God that it has obtained a licence for its new church and can relocate to a larger building where services can be held in Arabic, Farsi and Kurdish. Please pray for fruit from this ministry.

**SUNDAY 23:** Pray for our partner's practical support



*Our partners are committed to addressing the dire conditions faced by 1,000 Christians, including children, in Pakistan's brick kilns.  
Stock photo*

to Syrian Christian widows in Kurdistan who turn up regularly for food parcels, fellowship and encouragement.

**MONDAY 24:** Pray for our partner's publishing ministry, producing and distributing Christian literature in Kurdish. This year it will produce five more books. Ask God to give wisdom in dealing with a number of sensitive topics. Pray that the finished publications would be a blessing to those who read them.

**TUESDAY 25:** Ten years after ISIS seized much of northern Iraq, forcing thousands into Kurdistan, the Government is now closing the camps for displaced people and instructing them to return home. However, many do not feel safe to go back or have nowhere left to return to, especially those who

have become Christians since leaving. Please pray for God's provision and protection for them.

**WEDNESDAY 26:** Pray for protection for our partner's team and their families, especially when travelling. Conflict in the Middle East is causing regular flight cancellations and travel chaos across the region.

**THURSDAY 27:** Pray for Rev Canon Faez Jirjees of St George's Church in Baghdad. Thank God for his ministry and leadership. Pray for strength, wisdom and peace for him and his family.

**FRIDAY 28:** Pray for Christians throughout Iraq who are even more at risk and marginalised because of the ongoing conflict across the Middle East, in which all non-Muslims can be seen as 'the enemy'. Pray for protection for them and courage to stand firm in their faith.

MARCH 2025

## CHINA

**SATURDAY 1:** Give thanks that Wang Qiang, of Linfen Covenant House Church, was recently released from the detention centre where he had been held for two years, under charges of ‘fraud’ – for refusing to testify falsely against the church’s preachers. He has now been reunited with his wife and two children.

**SUNDAY 2:** Pray for prisoner of faith Zhang Chunlei, a church elder, who continues to grieve the loss of his mother. The inability to say goodbye to loved ones is a common situation for many Chinese Christian prisoners.

**MONDAY 3:** Pray for wisdom for Chinese Christians as the Government continues its crackdown on online communications. Christian lawyer Xie Qida was recently issued with a notice by the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau to stop ‘illegal behaviour’ and take down a TikTok post of a Christian hymn.

**TUESDAY 4:** Give thanks for Chinese house churches that have continued to meet in smaller groups despite the authorities’ efforts to close them down. Pray that they will be protected and continue to thrive.

**WEDNESDAY 5:** Pray that the Lord will give His people in China discernment as the

Communist Party proceeds with its programme for the ‘Sinicization of Christianity’. Pray that they will resist compromise and have courage to declare the Lordship of Christ above all.

**THURSDAY 6:** Continue to pray for all those behind bars because of their refusal to compromise their Christian calling. Pray that they will be strengthened, comforted and encouraged. Remember too their families who miss them greatly.

**FRIDAY 7:** Pray that Chinese shortwave radio broadcasts produced by our partner would not be jammed by the Government. Radio technicians work hard to

ensure that these broadcasts can be heard by Christians throughout China.

## EGYPT

**SATURDAY 8:** Egypt now has more than six million refugees from Sudan. Pray for partner ministries that are seeking to provide practical help, while reaching out to them with the gospel.

**SUNDAY 9:** Thank God that many Sudanese who find themselves displaced in Egypt are coming to know Christ. Pray they will grow in their new faith as they seek to rebuild their lives as refugees.

**MONDAY 10:** Thank God for



*Egyptian priests are reporting an increase in church attendance in locations where Strength to Stand groups are running. Stock photo*

the ministry of the Strength to Stand groups working with women in Egypt. Many participants find themselves without hope because of poverty and other issues, but find strength through the programme to stand firm in their faith.

**TUESDAY 11:** Thank God that priests are reporting an increase in church attendance in the locations where the Strength to Stand groups are running. Pray that they will be able to meet the demand from the men in their churches who are envious of the Bible teaching their wives are receiving.

**WEDNESDAY 12:** Pray for Release International partners in Egypt who face many pressures as they serve the church and reach out to others with the gospel. Some have faced direct threats. Pray for protection and wisdom in responding to this opposition.

**THURSDAY 13:** One woman helped by our partners said she was amazed they were able to find her in the remote village where she lives, and that the Lord had heard and answered her cries for help. Thank God for the way He is using our partners to provide practical help and to strengthen the faith of many such as this woman.

**FRIDAY 14:** Thank God for the way families are being impacted by our partners' ministries in Egypt. The practical care they offer has

helped improve people's perspective of God, especially their view of Him as a caring father.

## INDONESIA

**SATURDAY 15:** Pray for a house church group in Bekasi, who recently had their Sunday service stopped by an angry neighbour. Praise God that shortly afterwards an apology was offered. However, this is not an isolated incident on Java, and as a result the church has been forced to move to another venue.

**SUNDAY 16:** Praise God that a number of terrorist plots have been foiled during the past 12 months. Several individuals arrested had deliberately targeted Christians and their places of worship. Pray for protection for Indonesian believers.

**MONDAY 17:** Pray for Pastor Herri, who ministers in East Java. He was recently violently dragged from his church by a 50-strong mob. Pray for an end to a dispute over the church buildings.

**TUESDAY 18:** Please pray for 'Isaka', who pastors a large number of underground churches on one of the Indonesian Islands. He and other believers have recently had charges of blasphemy dismissed due to lack of evidence. Pray for their on-going protection and witness on the Island.

**WEDNESDAY 19:** Pray for

Release International's partner who was recently forced to flee from one of the Indonesian islands after local officials were alerted to his ministry activities. Praise God that when the authorities appeared on the scene he was already on his way to safety.

**THURSDAY 20:** Pray for believers from Muslim backgrounds who are being trained by Release International's partner in how to reach their neighbours with the gospel. Pray that these training sessions will be effective and will bear fruit.

**FRIDAY 21:** Pray for the mob who stormed into a local church meeting in Banten Province, Java. Videos of this event were posted online, creating more hostility. Pray that God would change the hearts of these aggressors.

## MALAYSIA

**SATURDAY 22:** Pray that the church in Malaysia would be strong in faith, and compassionate towards ethnic Malays being added to the kingdom, but who are often isolated and without fellowship.

**SUNDAY 23:** Praise God for two Malaysian believers who have a heart to share the gospel. Pray for their protection following a recent raid on their home.

**MONDAY 24:** Continue to pray for Susanna Koh, whose



Pastor Raymond Koh

husband, Raymond (pictured), was abducted off the street in broad daylight in 2017. Pray that she will remain strong as the court case into his disappearance continues, and that Raymond's whereabouts would finally be made known.

**TUESDAY 25:** Remember in prayer Malay believers who risk much in accepting Jesus. Several are losing the strength to continue and are struggling to attend house church meetings.

**WEDNESDAY 26:** Praise God for the organisations that regularly show the love

of Jesus to non-believers. Release International partners are involved in this ministry and are seeing a steady number come to faith.

**THURSDAY 27:** Pray for unity within the visible and underground churches of Malaysia and for an end to apathy, fear and jealousy in some congregations.

**FRIDAY 28:** Although risky, there are a number of Christian converts who are attempting to have their identity cards amended to show 'Christian' as their religious affiliation. This topic has been ongoing for many years in Malaysia. Pray that fairness would prevail.

## PHILIPPINES

**SATURDAY 29:** Pray that churches that are reaching out with the gospel would be effective and sensitive in their approaches to evangelism and discipleship. Pray too that churches that have been planted recently will grow and then set up new congregations themselves.

**SUNDAY 30:** Pray for one of our partners who is

considering buying a plot of land to provide a safe house for Muslim-background believers and a training and discipleship centre. Pray that God would guide our partner to the right location and provide the necessary resources for this venture.

**MONDAY 31:** Lift up to God in prayer believers who are living and ministering on an island in the southern Philippines that is under *Sharia* (Islamic law). They minister at great risk to themselves and their families. Pray for wisdom and protection as they share their faith.

### Lord Jesus

*Thank you for all Your people who are declaring Your name, despite living under oppression. Give them strength and courage to face the future with their eyes fixed on You.*

*Precious Saviour, have mercy on their persecutors who are blind to the truth. Open their eyes, that they may know the joy of Your love and forgiveness.*

*May Your kingdom come, Your will be done.*

*Amen*

Sources: ChinaAid; Release International partners and contacts; Voice of the Martyrs USA. Some names have been changed to protect identities.

While we do not provide financial support to every Christian mentioned in *Prayer Shield*, we believe in the power of prayer to change lives.

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Release International, PO Box 54, Orpington BR5 4RT  
Tel: 01689 823491 Email: [info@releaseinternational.org](mailto:info@releaseinternational.org)  
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