



Some pastors and churches have had to evacuate from the frontline in Ukraine as the Russian army has advanced
Stock image

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2026

As the gospel spreads and impacts more lives Christians around the world are bracing themselves for a year of increased persecution from repressive governments and religious militants. In this year's Persecution Trends report Release International partners describe the challenges Christians endured in the past 12 months and look ahead to the coming year



EUROPE

UKRAINE

Under the Russian occupation, Ukrainian Christians have to meet underground in small groups. The only exception is for those who receive Russian citizenship and re-register under a restrictive Russian religious law. At the time of writing the situation in the occupied territories resembled the Soviet Union era.

In order to avoid being imprisoned or killed some pastors and church fellowships have had to move from the frontline areas as the Russian army has advanced.

Persecution is increasing for two reasons, said our partners: Vladimir Putin's regime has established the so-called 'Russian World' in the conquered territories and it does not tolerate any opposition, especially in the religious sphere; the other reason is the war waged by Russia has intensified and become more brutal.

In 2026, they said, Ukrainian Christians in the occupied territories will be pressured to deny their Christian identity and become loyal citizens of Russia. If the war continues into 2026 Ukrainian Christians ministering along the frontline will be in danger of losing their lives due to extensive Russian drone activity. Russians trace Christian workers and their vehicles as they minister in the remote areas.

Our partners fear that persecution will only increase in every aspect as the Russians become more ruthless. *'[As Putin's] power starts crumbling ... he will do anything possible to eliminate any opposition within his sphere of influence.'*

They said: *'Pray for endurance and steadfastness for our team and our partners in Ukraine as the war has taken its toll on all of us. Ukrainians are tired and traumatised. Pray for wisdom and resources for us to respond to the needs, and pray for the war to end.'*

Our partners held two trauma-relief retreats for Ukrainian Christians suffering as a result of persecution and the war.

'Release International has played a big part in our ministry. It sponsored our frontline ministry and trauma-relief ministry. We're very thankful for this... and for the prayers of British Christians.'

CENTRAL ASIA

The persecution of Christians and church ministers is expected to remain broadly unchanged in 2026 except for probably Kyrgyzstan, where a deterioration is likely, and in the Russian Federation, where an intensification of persecution is all but certain.

'The creation and implementation of new laws ... have impacted the lives of many thousands of evangelical

Christians, grossly violating their civil rights and further restricting religious freedom,' said our partner.

'As a result, not only has the official state registration of new churches become impossible, but the existence of previously registered churches has also been put at risk.'

However, he added that there had been an improvement from a human rights perspective in Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan. *'The lives of Christians and the ministries of churches have changed significantly for the better, although this cannot be called complete freedom.'*

At the same time, he noted a sharp increase in pressure on evangelicals in Russia and Belarus.

He added: *'I thank God that working with Release International has made it possible to help many pastors' families.'*

SOUTH ASIA

INDIA

During 2025 Christians endured various forms of persecution including violence, threats and harassment. Churches were destroyed, pastors falsely imprisoned and home meetings and prayer for healing banned.

The situation is likely to deteriorate in 2026, as Indians continue to turn to Christ, thereby antagonising militant elements of the majority Hindu population.

One pastor who with his family was severely injured by a mob in Rajasthan in 2024 and then had false charges filed against him by the attackers, is on bail. Our partners ensured he and his family received hospital care and are currently covering his legal fees.

'Persecution is increasing because the nationalist Government is complicit in all these attacks by Hindu fanatics. All these actions are left unchecked and, in fact, openly encouraged by those opposed to Christians and other minorities,' said our partners.

'In the coming year we are likely to see more arrests and perhaps more raping of Christian women and even

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2026

The rise of the Hindu Nationalist BJP Government has coincided with an increase in Christian persecution



martyrdom. More imprisonments are expected as well as Christians being displaced or forced to flee their homes.'

In June 2025 a mob accompanied by local officials in Rajasthan attacked a Christian shelter for women, accusing the organisers of fraudulent conversions and exploitation.

This incident reflects a surge in assaults on Christian entities in the state, fuelled by its new anti-conversion law. In one village, several pastors were arrested, stripped and publicly abused.

Our partners said: *'Please pray for us and for believers across India as we face worsening persecution.'*

According to United Christian Forum statistics for 2025 at least 50 incidents

of persecution occur across India every day with only about 5 per cent reported.

Another partner cited the example of 12 Christian families being forced to flee into the jungle after an attack. Through the help of a Release International associate ministry they were resettled.

'Looking ahead to 2026, Christians are likely to face continued bans on evangelism, church meetings and even private worship. Economic hardship is expected as believers are denied access to markets, workplaces and agricultural opportunities, especially with local and state elections fuelling further polarisation,' it said, adding: *'State and central government policies, including anti-conversion laws, have led to*

destruction of churches, displacement of entire villages and growing fear. Yet, persecution has brought spiritual unity, deeper faith and greater dependence on God.'

SRI LANKA

Christians faced various forms of persecution in 2025, with legal and administrative restrictions on the rise while physical violence remained sporadic. The mandatory registration requirement for churches continued to pose an existential threat, as many smaller congregations could not meet the restrictive conditions, such as owning the property where they worshipped.

Local authorities and extremist Buddhist or Hindu groups frequently

used these regulations to pressure churches to close or stop meeting.

Release International's partners said: *'Persecution remains constant in its underlying nature but is changing in form. While the number of reported incidents has slightly declined, from 54 in 2023 to 51 in 2024, and 39 between January and October 2025, the methods of pressure have evolved. Overt violence and direct threats have reduced, but legal and administrative restrictions are intensifying, particularly through the enforcement of mandatory registration requirements for churches and gathering of information by local authorities.'*

At the same time, pressure is increasing from Hindu extremist groups which are becoming more organised, and are systematically targeting churches.

However, the main drivers of persecution against churches – religious extremism and a state preference for Buddhism – remain deeply entrenched in society. Buddhist and Hindu extremist groups continue to oppose Christian worship and mobilise local hostility, often influencing authorities to act against churches. The state's policies and practices grant privilege to Buddhism, creating structural barriers for Christian congregations to operate freely or obtain registration for their places of worship.

Our partners said: *'In 2026 Christians are likely to face increasing pressure from extremist groups, alongside tightening state restrictions. Hindu groups have become more active in the north and east. These movements, together with militant Buddhist actors, are expected to incite local authorities to act against churches under the pretext of enforcing registration requirements. There is also a growing risk of mob violence, as unregistered churches are increasingly portrayed as "illegal".'*

Arrests and imprisonments could occur if the Government took a harsher stance on enforcing church registration.

'Pray that [Christians] will remain steadfast; pray too for the hearts and minds of pastors' and ministry workers' children, who often face neglect and marginalisation.'



Rev Mark Mukan thanked UK Christians for being a 'lifeline amid the storms'

AFRICA

NIGERIA

Christians faced severe and escalating forms of persecution in northern Nigeria last year, primarily in the form of violent attacks by Islamist militant groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province) and Fulani herdsman extremists.

Our partner, Rev Mark Mukan, reported: *'These include targeted killings, the burning down of churches, kidnappings for ransom and forced displacement from farmlands and villages, often framed as "farmer-herder clashes" but with clear religious motivations against Christian communities.'*

In June a wave of attacks in Plateau and Benue states by Fulani militants left more than 200 Christians dead and thousands displaced in a single week, destroying homes, farms and churches in targeted Christian areas such as Mangu and Bokkos. These assaults, linked to escalating farmer-

herder tensions amid drought, saw militants chanting jihadist slogans, forcing survivors to flee with nothing and crippling local economies and church attendance as fear gripped communities.

'Our teams distributed aid to 150 affected families, but the trauma lingers, with children even afraid to go to school.'

According to reports from the International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law (Intersociety), more than 7,000 Christians were killed in the first 220 days of 2025 with hundreds more kidnapped, tortured or displaced.

'The increase in persecution stems from the unchecked expansion of jihadist groups, fuelled by ideological opposition to Christianity and Western influence,

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PERSECUTION TRENDS 2026



Militant Fulani herdsman are responsible for many Christian deaths

alongside government inaction and inadequate security responses.

'Sharia [Islamic law] in northern states continues to marginalise Christians as second-class citizens, leading to discrimination in jobs, education and justice, while climate-induced resource scarcity exacerbates herder-farmer conflicts with a religious tint, as militants exploit these for targeted violence against Christian villages.'

He estimates that in 2026 Christians in the north are likely to face intensified pressures from ongoing jihadist insurgencies. Blasphemy laws may see stricter enforcement, resulting in mob lynchings and arbitrary arrests, while economic hardships and climate change will heighten resource-based conflicts. Political instability could further erode religious freedoms, as highlighted by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom in its 2025 report.

'We foresee heightened risks from cross-border incursions by Sahel-based jihadists spilling into Nigeria and expect

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more Christians to be martyred, with projections exceeding 2025's 7,000 deaths if trends continue. Without swift action, 2026 could see martyrdoms double if global silence persists. More displacements are anticipated, as attacks have already forced millions into IDP (internally displaced person) camps.'

He added: *'Pray for divine protection for Christians; that Nigerian leaders would prioritise security and prosecute perpetrators without bias; and for spiritual strength and unity among believers.'*

He described the prayers and support of UK Christians as *'our lifeline amid the storms'*.

BURKINA FASO

Persecution generally is increasing, said our partner. *'Christians are particularly targeted for attack, kidnap and arbitrary detention. At the same time terrorist attacks are multiplying, despite the efforts of the Government.'*

In 2026 Christians may face attacks on places of worship (many have been burned or closed and believers killed during services); forced displacement and abandonment of homes or villages (numerous Christians have had to flee) and psychological pressure and constant fear (repeated violence creates a permanent climate of insecurity).

Our partner said that arrests and imprisonment, notably of church leaders, were highly probable in 2026 because the state and armed groups were using arbitrary arrests more frequently. Cases of martyrdom were likely to increase given the growing number of attacks.

Intensifying raids by armed groups in the north and east often targeting majority Christian villages and churches had forced many to flee. That trend is likely to continue.

'These events create a climate of fear ... fragmenting the Christian communities,' said our partner, but added: 'Despite the [violence], churches have known exponential growth thanks to education, food and spiritual projects (including the distribution of local-language Bibles and other evangelism materials).'

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

IRAN

Christians directly involved in ministry were a particular target for the authorities in 2025.

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

'Persecution is increasing because the authorities are aware of the growth in the number of converts and house churches and are determined to stem this. Their goal is to exterminate the Persian-speaking church and allow only the Christian-minority groups to operate. Longer prison sentences are being given to Christian workers.

'There is no doubt that the Government is concerned that disillusioned Muslims are becoming Christians [but] they are not willing to accept and acknowledge the rights of those who have converted.

'Believers can also face opposition from family or harassment in their work or studies.'

They said that converts and especially leaders and ministry workers were likely to face increasing pressure in 2026.

'The very fear of persecution is a worry as believers meeting in their [homes] do not know if they are under surveillance or not. These pressures have led to an exodus (mainly to Turkey) and this is likely to continue in 2026. However, many Iranian refugees in Turkey are finding it increasingly difficult to stay and some are facing deportation back to Iran.

'Pray for the protection of the house churches; for the training of new ministry workers; and for Christians in prison, especially those under lengthy sentences.'

IRAQ

The Kurdistan region of Iraq has become a refuge for persecuted Christians including Muslim-background believers

Iraqi Christians have found sanctuary in Kurdistan
Stock photo



(MBBs) fleeing violence, discrimination and threats from across Iraq and beyond.

Our partners provide humanitarian and spiritual support to persecuted believers, while the regional government provides a degree of protection and freedom of worship not found in other parts of Iraq. However, despite the comparative safety, persecution continues to affect believers within and beyond the region.

In southern and central Iraq persecution remained severe in 2025, especially for MBBs. Evangelism and conversion from Islam are considered crimes under Iraqi law. The Government and Sharia (Islamic law) do not recognise the right to change one's religion so those who convert may be prosecuted, imprisoned or face other punishments.

Persecution often comes from families, tribes and local communities. MBBs face rejection, and even death threats from their relatives or neighbours. As a result many live as secret believers.

Our partners said: *'Some European countries have begun returning Iranian and Iraqi asylum seekers to their home*

countries, putting their lives in great danger. Many of them have nowhere to go and face possible arrest, violence or death if they return.'

Even in Kurdistan itself refugees and MBBs face extreme difficulty obtaining legal recognition or residency. MBBs often face discrimination and social exclusion, while many persecuted believers have no jobs, income or access to education or healthcare.

'Years of displacement, fear and rejection have deeply affected their mental and emotional health. Pray for protection for all persecuted believers in Iraq and Kurdistan.'

ALGERIA

The exodus from the country of a number of church leaders has had a significant impact on the faith of many Christians.

In 2025 the authorities sealed off a church in Bejaia, bringing the total number of sealed churches to 16. At the time of writing the implementation of a decision by the Council of State to remove the seals on six churches was awaited, while about 15 church leaders and officials were still being

questioned, with others systematically being searched at ports and airports in Algeria.

The Bible Society in Algeria was still unable to release about 6,000 Bibles that had been blocked at the port of Algiers for more than three years, despite promises from the authorities. These Bibles were imported legally with the authorities' permission.

Our partner said: *'Persecution remains constant and I am hoping that it won't get worse in 2026. The reason is that the authorities continue to prosecute Christians for holding unauthorised worship and are refusing to grant the Protestant Church of Algeria official registration.'*

While fearing that there would be further court cases, job dismissals and harassment in the coming year, our partner believes that the authorities are putting pressure on the churches and their leaders in order to stop the *'phenomenon of evangelisation and conversion'* of Algerians.

However, our partner added: *'The persecution has pushed several leaders to leave the country and this has shattered the faith of many Christians.'*

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2026

The Taliban monitor the population's observance of Islamic practices



SOUTHWEST ASIA

AFGHANISTAN

Christians face threats from the Taliban, local devout Islamic leaders and from families. Fear and shame have often led the third group to use violence to force family members to renounce their faith.

Our partner said that persecution was increasing. *'In Islamic law, converting to Christianity is considered a crime, especially under the rule of extremist groups such as the Taliban.'*

Our partners expect that in 2026 Christian families, who have to practise their faith in secret, will continue to be hindered in raising their children according to their beliefs. *'In public their children are trained as Muslim children, which is very sad.'*

The Taliban, using local community leaders, monitors every region to check

how strictly the population is following Islamic law and question, harass and even imprison those it believes are not complying.

Our partners expect more arrests and imprisonments in 2026 and more Christians to be forced from their homes.

Another partner said: *'Some Christian workers in Afghanistan have been arrested and held in jail without any legal support. One [person], who was caught with a copy of the Bible, was forced to state on media that he only accepted Christianity to get financial benefits. There are others who have been arrested in Afghanistan, and no one knows what has happened to them. Believers who live in the region genuinely feel fearful about their safety and wellbeing and feel more and more under threat.'*

PAKISTAN

Since 2016 the recently banned Islamist party, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), has persecuted Christians across the country, especially in Punjab province. In the

past two years believers have been falsely accused of blasphemy and even killed.

The TLP's agenda is to kill Christians who do not convert to Islam; to seize the property of Christians by falsely accusing them and to blackmail them by threatening to accuse them of blasphemy.

'At the same time, as a Christian you are not given your rights in educational institutions, government and private offices and all other areas of life, which creates fear and insecurity,' said our partner. However, he added that longer term he believed that *'there will be a decrease in persecution against Christian in Pakistan'*

This is because the Government recently took action to ban the TLP. *'[This] is a ray of hope that there will be a decrease in persecution. Please continue to pray and thank God.'*

However, when it came to discrimination he was less optimistic. *'It is a mindset of the majority people to treat Christians as second-class citizens.'*

'We feel under pressure living in Muslim

areas, especially in villages or brick kilns, which are feudal, and when interacting with the police and courts.'

Christians are vulnerable in these environments where girls and women are often sexually abused. Last year our partner enabled three families to escape the bonded labour of the brick kilns.

Christians are denied jobs and admission to educational institutions, while the lack of influential representation in Government means that development work in Christian communities is minimal.

Thankfully, however, our partner expects fewer arrests and imprisonments this coming year.

EASTERN ASIA

CHINA

'The Chinese Government is trying to eradicate the church,' says Dr Bob Fu, of ChinaAid, Release International's partner.

'Even under Chairman Mao it acknowledged that the church could not be totally destroyed but today it is trying to do just that.'

'Persecution against Christians is at its worst since the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has banned children under 18 from even going to church.'

'Students, CCP members, civil servants, law enforcement and even doctors and nurses are now prohibited from going to church or holding their beliefs in the workplace.'

'Millions of Chinese Christian children for the first time since the Cultural Revolution have been forced to sign a form to renounce their faith in public in front of students and teachers. This is a national trauma for millions of Chinese Christian children.'

He added: *'We have also seen under President Xi Jinping all the government-sanctioned church pastors having to make a public pledge not only to be dedicated to the doctrine of communism and socialism in their teaching in the church but also to pledge their absolute allegiance and personal loyalty to Xi.'*

Bob Fu says the Chinese church is engaged in a true spiritual battle



In 2025 the CCP launched its most systematic and aggressive campaign against the urban house church networks such as Beijing Zion Church.

Tithes and offerings were also criminalised. Dr Fu said: *'Pastors have been arrested and indicted and some have been given lengthy prison sentences. This is the new trend of persecution. It is a true spiritual battle. The CCP has launched a war against the Christian faith. President Xi apparently takes a very strong approach with the aim of eradicating the church.'*

NORTH KOREA

The clearest cases of persecution are not the ones that appear in western or even North Korean media, reports our partner, but the *'ones the North Korean Government does not publicise.'*

'It can provide credible evidence for foreign missionaries' subversive acts and can dismiss outlandish reports of Christians being steamrollered to death or mass executions in a soccer stadium but it does not quite know how to craft a narrative for incriminating a citizen whose only crime was possessing a Bible.'

'So, according to what we hear often through our sources, the authorities tend to deal with such Christians quietly, showing up at their house in the middle of the night and hauling them and their

families off to a concentration camp or to be executed.'

It is a different story for North Koreans living over the border in China. Beijing's main interest with regard to female defectors is to get them to stay in China and perform the role of a wife or mother within a local family. However, if they try to escape, the authorities do not shy away from sending them back to North Korea.

Surprisingly, they encourage them to engage in religious activity among themselves as long as they stay in their place of residence in China with their families and do not have fellowship with Christians of other ethnic groups or countries and, in some cases, even Christians of other regions in China.

'The persecution of North Korean Christians is increasing in both North Korea and China because both governments view Christianity as a channel for foreign activity which threatens the sovereignty of the state, so they are continuously developing more advanced ways to surveil, regulate and eliminate such activity.'

Our partner believes it likely that more Christians will be arrested, imprisoned, displaced and martyred in North Korea in 2026. In China it is less likely that they will be executed but they could be sent back to North Korea where they could be killed.