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WORLD WATCH LIST 2025



WWL 2025 Trends Summary

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PRESSKONTAKT

Sara Bornold
Kommunikatör
070-490 75 04
sarabo@od.org

Sofia Dernánd
Kommunikationschef
070-898 34 75
sofiad@od.org

Peter Paulsson
Generalsekreterare
073-088 44 88
peterp@od.org

Open Doors Sverige

Drottninggatan 60
702 22 Örebro
019-31 05 00
sweden@od.org
Org.nr: 802439-9845



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VIOLENCE DRIVES SIGNIFICANT SCORE INCREASES

An increase in anti-Christian violence propelled significant score changes among several countries on the World Watch List. While violence was the common denominator among those countries, the contexts were different: either tightly controlled autocratic states, or countries that are unstable due to weak government or civil war.

AUTHORITARIANISM IN CENTRAL ASIA

No country among the top 50 had a greater score increase than Kyrgyzstan, which added more than 7 points to its persecution score. Ranked 61st a year ago, the Central Asian country rose 14 spots to rank 47th on the 2025 World Watch List — its first appearance in the top 50 since 2013. It was, by far, the biggest move on the list, and the primary reason was a sharp uptick in violence against the church. For example, the Baptist Union reported that on multiple occasions during the year, local residents hurled stones at the office of a Christian organization in Karakul in an attempt to drive it off its property.

In March, representatives of the State Commission on Religious Affairs, some of them armed, raided St. Nicholas Catholic Church in Talas, forced departing worshippers back inside, and held the congregation there until two Slovak nuns had signed a statement admitting to "illegal missionary activities" and "spreading their ideology."

Such assaults helped to drive up Kyrgyzstan's historically low violence score faster than in any other country. It happened against a backdrop of a presidency that has been concentrating power to itself for several years. Amnesty International said in April that the government has intensified its campaign to stifle public criticism and peaceful dissent. New laws promoting vaguely defined notions of cultural traditions and national values have been undermining the rule of law and restricting freedom of expression. Overly broad definitions of political activity are being used to curb the right to freedom of association.

It was a similar story in neighboring Kazakhstan, whose score rose 3 points for 2025; only four countries registered a greater increase. That was enough to propel the country up 9 places in the rankings, to 38th. Only Kyrgyzstan ascended more spots. And again, the reason was a pronounced increase in violence against Christians. Since 2010 the Kazakh regime under President Nursultan Nazarbayev had taken on a more authoritarian character, and a 2019 change in leadership brought no real improvement for Christians. Sparked by energy price rises in 2022, the bloodiest unrest since the country's post-Soviet independence broke out in multiple cities. The government now seems more terrified than ever at the prospect of protests, and Kazakhstan's police state leaves nothing to chance.

For example, World Watch Research received reports of police raids on four worship meetings of three unregistered Protestant communities in southern Kazakhstan. Sources reported that at least 20 Christian women were sexually abused because of their religion, and at least as many were forcibly married to Muslim men. Such numbers are a tiny share in a country of 20 million people, about a quarter of whom identify as Christian, but they are a noticeable departure from the immediate past, especially as the larger Orthodox church does not seem to be affected. Protestants are a small minority in this quarter of Christians.



CIVIL WAR IN YEMEN AND MYANMAR

Since 2015, Yemen has endured a civil war between ethnic Houthi rebels and the government, which has backing from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. A ceasefire agreement remains elusive, and lawlessness permeates the country, creating space for oppression targeting minorities, including Christians. But it's not only the areas under Houthi rebel influence; Christians living in areas under the internationally recognised government also are not faring well. Yemeni law outlaws leaving Islam and blaspheming the religion, for which some Christians have been arrested. During the WWL 2025 reporting period, Christians found themselves detained by authorities, either because of their faith itself, or in response to bogus accusations made by family or others as a form of anti-Christian harassment. The increase in Houthi power and influence following the October 2023 attacks on Israel has meant that dozens of Christian house churches no longer can meet. The few remaining migrant Christians are legally free to conduct worship in private, but this hasn't happened for years, due to the civil war.

The dangerous instability within Yemen is reflected in the 4.6-point increase in its score on the World Watch List, a change that was driven primarily by an increase in anti-Christian violence. Only Kyrgyzstan registered a greater increase in total score. The increase helped to push Yemen up 2 spots on the list, to No. 3. In all the world, only North Korea and Somalia are more difficult places for Christians to live.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the 2021 military coup, and the continued armed conflict between the army and a host of opposition forces in 2024 nudged the country up for 4 spots on the list, to 13th. It would require many pages to describe in detail the causes of Myanmar's turmoil; the forces arrayed in conflict and their shifting, murky alliances; the influence of neighboring China; and the current on-the-ground situation — to say nothing of the crisis of refugee camps across the border in Bangladesh. Suffice it to say here that hopes are dim for a quick end to the war; the security situation in certain regions remains dire and has even deteriorated; and the likelihood of continued crimes against humanity can't be discounted.

Myanmar's Christians, about 8 percent of the population, are caught in the midst of the ongoing fighting throughout the country, and increasingly in the cities as well. In Kachin state alone, more than 100,000 Christians are languishing in displacement camps to avoid being killed or detained by regime forces or the Kachin rebels. The army increasingly attacks Christian churches where they are suspected of harboring insurgents. It has detained pastors and ordinary church members suspected of supporting or even leading the opposition forces and has launched indiscriminate attacks in some predominantly or strongly Christian states. Attacks on Christians also come from ethnic insurgent forces. Christians living in the lawless remote and border regions of Myanmar are not only hard-pressed by a government relentlessly attacking everyone it assumes to be connected to the opposition, but also by groups benefitting from a drug trade and other lawless activities that remain profitable even in the midst of war.



CONTINUED VIOLENCE ACROSS SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

More Christians live in Africa than on any other single continent. Through the years, the World Watch List has documented that the largest Christian population on Earth has been widely afflicted by targeted violence. The pattern persists in 2025. Chronic government instability has created a vacuum filled by opportunistic Islamic militants. Since the 2023 World Watch List, the violence score for the 15 sub-Saharan countries included among the top 50 on the list has risen, on average, by 1 point. Violence in 13 of those 15 countries — including Burkina Faso, Mali, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo — is rated in the “extremely high” category under World Watch List methodology.

The Open Doors Arise Africa campaign is a multi-year response to this persistent reality. Its aim — to stand with the African church, to help it be salt and light where persecution is most extreme, to live out their faith and renew the next generation — relies upon the prayers and material support of Christians around the world.

Sudan’s World Watch List total score rose 3 points; only three countries in the top 50 had greater increases. The increase was driven by the intensification of the civil war that broke out in Spring 2023 between Sudan’s army and an alliance of militias. Research for the 2025 World Watch List registered increases in the number of Christians killed and sexually assaulted, as well as the number of Christian homes and businesses attacked. In a country of 49 million people, the number of internally displaced people by mid-2024 had surpassed 7.7 million — the largest displacement crisis in the world. Compounding the pressure on Christians is a racial component: Those of indigenous African descent, as opposed to Arab ethnicity, are targets not only for their faith but also for their ethnic identity. Christians of all backgrounds are trapped in the chaos, unable to flee. Churches are shelled, looted and occupied by the warring parties. The surge in the violence score moved Sudan upward 3 spots on the list, to 5th.

For five straight years, Chad’s total score has risen by at least two points, finally pushing it into the top 50 of the World Watch List in 2025, ranking 49th. Only Kyrgyzstan registered a greater increase in its violence score during the year. Elections in 2024 have not changed the reality of ongoing political tensions, weak democratic processes, and the government’s ongoing fight against the Islamic militant group Boko Haram — as well as the anti-Christian violence that blossoms in the unchecked environment. The military rules by decree; civil society has little access to government; and in February 2024 security forces killed Chad’s main opposition leader. In the east, a humanitarian crisis boils in camps full of refugees fleeing Sudan’s civil war. Islamic militancy groups such as Boko Haram and armed Fulani herdsmen feed on these unstable conditions, leading to killings, abductions, forced displacements and generally heightened discrimination of Christians. They are denied access to community resources, receive unequal treatment in the workplace, and endure social ostracism, surveillance and intimidation.

In these steadily declining conditions, Christians often are seen as being allies to the “other side” or as foreign agents. They are being displaced, and their properties are being destroyed and burned. The situation is especially difficult in regions outside the capital and largest city, N’Djamena, where Christians often resort to practicing their faith in secrecy due to the influence of radical groups.



Nigeria stands apart from this group of sub-Saharan countries, but only because there was not much room for conditions to worsen: Nigeria already was, and remained, among the most urgently dangerous places on earth for a Christian. Its score on the 2025 World Watch List is almost identical to its 2024 score. The measure of anti-Christian violence in the country is already at the maximum possible under World Watch List methodology. Nigeria's new ranking on the list, 7th, remains firmly among the top 10. The reasons are well established: In the country's North-Central zone, where Christians are more common than they are in the North-East and North-West, radicalized Islamic ethnic Fulani militia attack farming communities, killing many hundreds, Christians above all. Jihadist groups such as Boko Haram and the splinter group Islamic State in West Africa Province, among others, are also active in the country's northern states, where federal government control is scant and Christians and their communities continue to be the targets of raids, sexual violence, and roadblock killings. Abductions for ransom have increased considerably over recent years. The violence has also spread to the southern states.

And now, a new jihadist terror group, Lakurawa, has emerged in the northwest, armed with advanced weaponry and a radical Islamist agenda. Lakurawa is affiliated with the expansionist Al-Qaeda insurgency Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin, or JNIM, originating in Mali. A 2024 report by the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa concluded that among the 30,880 civilians killed in Nigeria from 2020 through 2023, the number of Christians was 22,360, while the number of Muslims killed was 8,315 — a disparity of nearly 3-to-1 in a country where the Christian and Muslim shares of the population are roughly equal. During Christmas 2023, for example, at minimum 295 Christians were killed by more than 3,000 Fulani militants fanning out to 38 villages in Plateau State, as reported by Truth Nigeria.

In 2023, new president Bola Ahmed Tinubu reshuffled his leadership, establishing a more equal balance of Christians and Muslims at the levers of government. The hope was that this would steer security forces toward more effective intervention against the human rights violations being perpetrated against Christians. Little evidence of this was detected, however, during the 12-month reporting period for the 2025 World Watch List, which concluded 30 Sept. 2024. On the evening of Easter Sunday in 2024, for example, villages in southern Kaduna state were attacked in an area heavy with military installations. Witnesses told the news media they saw no government effort to protect the victims.

SIGNS OF THE CHURCH GOING UNDERGROUND

How do you measure persecution when there's no Christian church left to persecute?

Algeria's total score in 2025 is 2 points less than a year earlier. The reason? All Protestant churches have been forced to close; there are none remaining that can be targeted for closure. That fact caused a drop in Algeria's score for violence, which brought down the overall score.

Yet, other forms of pressure on Algeria's Christians intensified. The number of Christians awaiting trial and sentencing is at an all-time high. Others keep a low profile to avoid pro-

secution under laws that regulate non-Muslim religious practice. The government has been attempting various forms of financial and organizational pressure to weaken churches, with a particular focus on online Christian activities. The overall pressure, in combination with the closure of the churches, has forced many Algerian Christians into isolation.

Christian isolation and church diminishment is a pattern detected in the 2025 World Watch List in a number of countries:

The small Christian community in Libya is extremely careful to avoid a repeat of the March 2023 crackdown that swept up numerous Christians for arrest.

In Syria, the looting of churches reduced somewhat during the reporting period — one year removed from the February 2023 earthquake. But, rising crime, increased corruption, growing religious discrimination and political instability are fueling fear. This is driving a Christian emigration, altering the demographics of the ancient birthplace of the Church, as well as weakening churches and challenging the future of Christian life in the region.

Under the shadow of the Israeli-Hamas war that began in October 2023, Christian communities in Gaza and the West Bank have come to the brink of extinction. In Gaza, at least 33 Christians were killed, and most houses destroyed during the violence. In the West Bank, existing limitations imposed by the Israeli authorities were tightened; travel restrictions that already applied to Christian communities were narrowed further following the outbreak of the war. Many Christian families have moved abroad or are trying to leave.

The church in Afghanistan is deeply underground, and for that reason there are fewer visible expressions of Christianity for the Taliban authorities to crack down on. On the other hand, the same isolation of the church makes it very difficult to get verified accounts of faith-related attacks.

With each year, the era of the church's relatively open presence in China fades deeper into memory. Unregistered churches, once tolerated by the Chinese government, now are considered illegal as authorities more regularly enforce regulations and tighten policies. State-approved churches come under stronger ideological pressure; new laws steer pastors into indoctrination sessions, where they are urged to preach accordingly, and outlaw religious education for children. Smaller congregations are either forced to merge to make a larger church that is easier to control, or to take their fellowships underground, into isolated home groups.

China is the world's most advanced surveillance state, but it is not alone, and Christians in autocratic states generally are being more alert to being watched, both online and IRL — in real life. In China and elsewhere, World Watch List researchers report they detect a growing caution among Christians to be open with their faith. This is an especially urgent signal to Open Doors, whose mission is to strengthen what remains (Rev. 3:2) of the Church, wherever it may be, so it may continue to live up to its calling to shine the Light of Christ.

MEXICO STANDS OUT IN LATIN AMERICA

Of note in Latin America is Mexico's total score of 71, which represents a 2.4-point increase from the previous year and is the highest score the World Watch List has ever assigned to Mexico.

The sphere of Christian life in Mexico that made the single largest contribution to its total score was violence. While scores increased in most spheres for 2025, Mexico's violence score of 14.6 is the highest the country has ever received and is the highest violence score among all Latin American countries on the World Watch List.

Organized crime is a prominent concern in Mexico, and cartels battling each other often target church leaders and Christian organizations, especially those who attempt to broker peace or who provide assistance to victims of violence and intimidation. World Watch List researchers during the most recent reporting period noted a jump in the number of Christians killed and abducted because of their faith, as well as an increase in attacks on Christian homes and other property. It was, generally, a more violent year in Mexico; the country held elections in mid-2024, and a wave of attacks nationwide left at least 37 candidates for various offices dead, and hundreds more candidates injured. While the pre-election violence surge was not directed at Christians specifically, it intensified the already dangerous conditions for the church.

Mexico also stands out in 2025 because it is the only Latin American country in the top 50 to rise in the rankings. Mexico now ranks 31st on the list, one spot lower than Nicaragua and five spots behind No. 26 Cuba. The last time Mexico ranked this high was 2005.

GOOD NEWS

The most extreme forms of violence against Christians in Indonesia abated during the 12-month period ending 30 Sept. 2024. The portion of the World Watch List score that is driven by evidence of violence registered in the "extremely high" range a year ago but has dropped during the most recent year to "very high." While that may sound like a distinction without a difference, the drop was largely due to a year when the documented killings of Christians on religious grounds, and the number of attacks on churches, declined. The reduction in violence drove Indonesia's total score down enough to take the country out of the top 50 countries on the World Watch List. The country ranked 42nd in 2025 and ranks 59th this year.

Conditions in Colombia are by no means encouraging; in addition to persistent anti-government guerilla movements, a host of criminal groups fight among themselves for control of territory and the drug trade. They turn their violence upon those they consider to be a challenge to their attempts at territorial domination, including churches that work among the most needy. Yet for all that, guerillas and drug traffickers in February 2024 extended a temporary cease-fire, and anti-Christian violence in Colombia cooled somewhat during the most recent World Watch List research period. While the country's violence score remains in the "extremely high" range, its decrease was due to a reduction of the number of Christi-



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ans killed because of their faith. Colombia's total score declined by 2 points and it dropped 12 spots to rank No. 46 on the World Watch List.

About the most that can be said about the situation for Christians in Nicaragua is that, while violence against Christians remains at an all-time high, it could have been worse in other ways. The country's 2025 World Watch List score rose by about 1 point from the previous year; its ranking at No. 30 remained unchanged. The autocratic President Daniel Ortega continued to crack down on opposition voices, and that has made church leaders, who are among the main critics of the government, particularly vulnerable targets for reprisals. Yet, things might have gone even more badly for the church if not for asset and travel sanctions imposed on the Ortega government in 2024 by the United States and Canada, joining the European Union's 2022 Nicaragua sanctions regime in an attempt to pressure Ortega to restore human rights and democracy. In January 2024, the Ortega government released, denaturalized and deported Bishop Rolando José Álvarez of Matagalpa, whom the government had detained in August 2022 and, in February 2023, sentenced to 26 years in prison for anti-Nicaragua misinformation, obstruction and disobedience. His release after 11 months, and the release of 18 other priests and seminarians who had been held for a month, can be regarded as good news, of course, although it also represents the latest in a string of deportations of Nicaraguan clergy. During the 12-month World Watch List reporting period, 94 Christians — the vast majority of them priests — were expelled. Since 2018, an estimated 110 priests have been deported, or about 15% of the Catholic Church's clergy in Nicaragua, according to The Pillar.

PRESSKONTAKT

Sara Bornold
Kommunikatör
070-490 75 04
sarabo@od.org

Sofia Dernánd
Kommunikationschef
070-898 34 75
sofiad@od.org

Peter Paulsson
Generalsekreterare
073-088 44 88
peterp@od.org

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702 22 Örebro
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