

Persecuted and Forgotten?

A REPORT ON CHRISTIANS
OPPRESSED FOR THEIR FAITH
2020-22

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Aid to the
Church in Need

ACN UNITED KINGDOM

Foreword

By Fr Andrew Adeniyi Abayomi

I was still saying Mass when I heard the explosions. I was on the sanctuary, putting incense in the thurible, preparing for the procession outside the church, when I heard two loud noises and saw my panicked parishioners running in different directions. Someone ran to me and shouted: “Father, unknown gunmen!”

I don’t know how many of them there were – some say six, others say four – but I do know they were organised. Some of the attackers disguised themselves as parishioners and worshipped with us during Mass, knowing the whole time they intended to kill us.

As bullets filled the air, I thought only of how to save my parishioners. Some of them managed to lock the entrance door and I urged people to move into the sacristy. Once in the inner part of the sacristy, I could not move: children surrounded me, and adults clung to me. I shielded them just as a hen shields her chicks.

My flock, especially the children, cried out: “Father, please save us – Father, pray!” I told them not to worry, as God would do something. There were three or four more explosions, one after the other inside the Church and there was sporadic shooting of guns by the attackers. It was a well-planned attack that lasted about 20-25 minutes.

Once the message came that the attackers had gone, we left the sacristy. Dead bodies were strewn across the church and there were many injured. My spirit was deeply troubled. With the help of parishioners who could drive, we immediately began to take our injured brothers and sisters to St Louis Hospital and the Federal Medical Centre. Since then, I have visited the wounded, praying with them, administering the Sacrament of the Sick and encouraging them to keep hope alive.

The world has turned away from Nigeria. A genocide is taking place, but no one cares. Nearby security personnel and police failed to come to our rescue, even though the attack lasted at least 20 minutes.



Father Abayomi is the associate pastor at St Francis Xavier’s Church in Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria, which was attacked during Mass on Pentecost Sunday, 5th June 2022. The massacre left at least 40 worshippers dead and dozens seriously wounded.

Aid to the Church in Need (ACN)’s publication of *Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2020–22* is vitally important as it highlights the dire threats facing believers. It is not just Christians in Nigeria who suffer, but those in Pakistan, China, India and many other places.

Christians are killed all across Africa, their churches attacked and villages razed to the ground. In Pakistan, they are unjustly detained on spurious charges of blasphemy. Underage Christian girls are kidnapped, raped, forced to convert and marry middle-aged men in countries such as Egypt, Mozambique and Pakistan. In China and North Korea, totalitarian governments crush the faithful underfoot, monitoring their every move. And, as this report shows, the list of abuses goes on.

The suffering Church needs people to speak out for us. For the killing to stop, more organisations like ACN need to proclaim the truth of what is happening to Christians all over the world. If not, we will always remain persecuted and forgotten.

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Main Findings

Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2020–22

“My God, it is hard to be chained and to receive blows, but I live this moment as you present it to me... And, in spite of everything, I would not want any of [my captors] to be harmed.”¹

These are the words of Sister Gloria Cecilia Narváez, speaking to Aid to the Church in Need in January 2022, three months after her release from captivity in Mali, west Africa. She was held by Islamist militants for four-and-a-half years, during which time the Franciscan Sister was repeatedly physically and psychologically tortured. Sister Gloria made clear that her Christian faith was the source of the animus against her. She described how her captors became enraged when she prayed. On one occasion, when a jihadist leader found her praying, he struck her saying: “Let’s see if that God gets you out of here.” Sister Gloria continued: “He spoke to me using very strong, ugly words... My soul shuddered at what this person was saying, while the other guards laughed out loud at the insults.”²

Sister Gloria’s shocking account highlights the suffering inflicted on people whose only crime is their Christian faith. *Persecuted and Forgotten?* provides

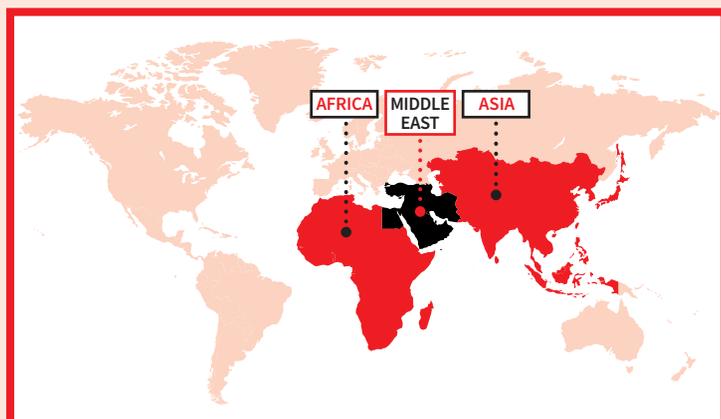
first-hand testimony; case studies; country, regional and global analysis on the extent to which Christians are targeted around the world. In the run-up to the period under review, human rights violations against Christians deteriorated sharply, with the Pew Research Center’s figures for 2019 showing that Christians were harassed in more countries than any other faith group.³ There was also a sudden increase in violations against Christians – up from 145 countries in 2018 to 153 a year later.⁴ Open Doors’ 2022 World Watch List reported “seismic changes in the persecution landscape”⁵ for Christians. For the first time in the survey’s 29-year history, all worst-offending 50 countries scored “high” persecution levels.⁶

Evidence collected for this edition of *Persecuted and Forgotten?* suggested that in many countries the situation for Christians continued to decline in the period under review which ran from October 2020 to September 2022. By no means exhaustive, this eighth edition of the report examines the situation in 24 countries where religious freedom violations against Christians are of particular concern. This provides an insight into the nature and severity of human rights abuses suffered by Christians and, in many cases, other minorities.

The key findings of *Persecuted and Forgotten?* 2020–22 are:

- In 75 percent of countries surveyed, the oppression or persecution of Christians increased.

(See the map on pp. 6–7 for more details)



- **In Africa**, the situation of Christians worsened in all countries reviewed⁷ amid evidence of a sharp increase in genocidal violence from militant non-state actors, including jihadists.
- **In the Middle East**, continuing migration deepened the crisis threatening the survival of three of the world’s oldest and most important Christian communities located in Iraq, Syria and Palestine.
- **In Asia**, state-authoritarianism has been the critical factor causing worsening oppression against Christians in Burma (Myanmar), China, Vietnam and elsewhere. At its worst, freedom of religion and conscience is being strangulated, as in North Korea. Elsewhere in Asia, religious nationalism has caused increasing persecution against Christians in Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and elsewhere.

Regional analysis

Africa

Christians across the continent face the threat of rising Islamist extremism. Groups like Nigeria's Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) still try to establish caliphates in the Sahel region, each with its own wali (governor) and governing structure. Taking a hard-line Salafi-jihadist stance, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) banned music and parties, and heavily regulated social events like weddings.⁸ In June 2021, ISGS fighters executed five Christian civilians seized at a roadblock between Gao, Mali, and Niamey, Niger.⁹ In Mozambique, Al-Shabab stepped up its terror campaign, killing Christians, attacking Christian villages and burning down churches. The group is affiliated to Daesh (ISIS), which claimed responsibility for the March 2021 attack on Palma, north-east Mozambique.¹⁰

Jihadism is one reason why **Nigeria teeters on the brink of becoming a failed state**, with kidnappings, priests killed and deadly attacks on churches becoming increasingly regular. According to one analysis, between January 2021 and June 2022, more than 7,600 Christians were killed.¹¹ Controversy arose in November 2021 when the United States government removed Nigeria from its list of "Countries of Particular Concern" in regard to religious freedom. Rev'd Samson Ayokunle, president of the Christian Association of Nigeria, hit back, saying there was a militant extremist agenda to "wipe away Christianity".¹² Indeed, in 2020 extremists exploited coronavirus restrictions to attack Christian settlements. A letter from UK Parliamentarians and charities warned the British government that militant members of the Fulani herder community had been "taking advantage of COVID-19 lockdowns to intensify attacks on villages" in Nigeria's Middle Belt.¹³ Two major incidents of Christian persecution in Nigeria made international news. First was the stoning to death, and setting alight, of Deborah Samuel, a 25-year-old Christian, in May 2022, after she shared "blasphemous" messages on WhatsApp. Second was the deadly attack on St Francis Xavier's Church, Owo, Ondo State, during Mass on Pentecost Sunday, killing at least 40.

Extremist groups are not the only problem on the continent and **state actions have hit Africa's Christians detrimentally.** With the removal

of President Omar Al-Bashir in April 2019 ending a period of increasing Islamism, Christians in Sudan were waiting to see how the new government would act after the 2021 military coup. Early signs were not encouraging, with Church leaders detained and a couple charged with "adultery" because the husband converted to Christianity. On 24th June 2022, four men were arrested on grounds of apostasy, although they were later released. According to reports, they were subjected to degrading and inhuman treatment.¹⁴

In-country sources suggested both Eritrean and Ethiopian troops attacked clergy and church buildings in Ethiopia's Tigray region. Eritrean troops stand accused of a campaign of ethnically motivated "cultural cleansing", reportedly participating in massacres of Ethiopian Christians, such as the one at Aksum, as well as destroying ancient monasteries and church buildings. In May 2021, Patriarch Mathias, the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, said the Ethiopian government, with the help of Eritrean forces, "want to destroy the people of Tigray" – asking why Ethiopia wanted to "declare genocide on the people of Tigray".¹⁵ That same month, ACN was told that nuns had been raped as part of the attack on Tigray.¹⁶

Middle East

Paradoxically, there are signs that in parts of the Middle East Christians are in a worse situation than during the Daesh (ISIS) occupation. Evidence came to light showing the threat to the survival of some of the world's oldest Christian communities had significantly deepened. The decline is most marked in Syria where, within a decade, Christians have plummeted from 1.5 million (10 percent of the population) in 2011, before the war began, to perhaps 300,000 (less than two percent of the population). In the aftermath of the 4th August 2020 Beirut explosions, where the greatest impact was felt in the Christian quarter, Lebanon's Church leaders questioned the community's long-term survival. In Iraq, where the rate of exodus is much slower, the community is down from perhaps 300,000 before the 2014 Daesh invasion, to as few as 150,000 in Spring 2022. ACN research showed that in parts of Iraq where Christians had been a strong minority, such as the capital Baghdad, the community was a shadow of itself, with churches struggling to stay open. However, of the seven Middle

ERITREA

Aksum massacre

NOVEMBER 2020: Hundreds of people – including priests and other church elders – were killed in a series of attacks, culminating in a massacre at the Orthodox Maryam Tsiyon Church in Aksum (or Axsum), where the Ark of the Covenant is believed to be located.¹

A local source told ACN: “I heard there were 1,000 people in the church. It might be that more were injured and died later. 750 were killed for sure.” They added: “In Aksum, there is the Ark of the Covenant. Maybe the people were there protecting the Ark and... they were taken outside and shot.”

Amnesty International verified the massacre in February 2021, after speaking to 41 survivors and witnesses to the mass killings. The NGO said: “Eritrean troops fighting in Ethiopia’s Tigray state systematically killed hundreds of unarmed civilians in the northern city of Axum on 28th–29th November, opening fire in the streets and conducting house-to-house raids in a massacre that may amount to a crime against humanity.”²

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East countries in this review, Iraq was the only one to see an improvement. A comprehensive post-Daesh stabilisation programme involving the rebuilding of Christian towns and villages, homes, schools, churches and other public facilities was crowned by the long-awaited Papal visit of March 2021.

And yet in Iraq, as in so many other Middle East countries, the Christian community feels the danger posed by the underlying menace of jihadist groups. Continuing Islamist violence, for example in northern Syria, showed that even denouncement of extremism by senior Islamic leaders was apparently making little impact on the ground. Indeed, the extremist threat persisted across the region. **More than five years on from the military defeat of Daesh, the threat of a full-scale resurgence has by no means disappeared. A revival of jihadism has the potential to deliver a knock-out blow for Christianity in its ancient heartland.** This is

not only because the numbers of Christians are now so low but also because their confidence is so fragile; they may have made it through times of genocide but, in the absence of security, the draw of migration is – for many of them – all but irresistible. That desire to leave is magnified in a cultural setting which remains antipathetic to Christians. Treated as second-class citizens, discriminated against at school and in the workplace, poor pay or joblessness trigger many to seek a life outside the country.

This existential threat extends to parts of Israel/Palestine. Nearly 75 years on from the creation of the state of Israel, Christians in the West Bank have declined from 18 percent to less than one percent today. Again, militants are a major concern. Groups such as Hamas were seen as factors driving migration in the West Bank. Although the overall number of Christians in Israel is growing – increasing by 1.4 percent in 2021 – ongoing attacks by fringe

Overview of Countries

Persecuted and Forgotten? 2020–22 examines human rights violations against Christians in 24 countries. The countries include those where it is particularly difficult to be a Christian.

Israel/Palestine
NO CHANGE ↔
Christians still attacked by radical groups. Authorities accused of sometimes failing to support communities.

Syria
SLIGHTLY WORSE ↓
Much-reduced Christian communities beset by extreme malnutrition, Islamist oppression and attacks on some Christian-majority towns and villages.

Turkey
SLIGHTLY WORSE ↓
Ongoing tensions with state exacerbated by projects to re-Islamise historic Christian sites.

Iraq
SLIGHTLY BETTER ↑
2021 Papal visit celebrated rebuilding of decimated Christian communities after genocide, but growth limited by state oppression and militant groups.

Saudi Arabia
SLIGHTLY WORSE ↓
Extremist violence including 2020 attack on a rare Christian cemetery. Ongoing bans on Christian places of worship and public display of crosses, Bibles, etc.

Egypt
NO CHANGE ↔
Increased government support offset by continuing attacks, abductions of women and other problems.

Mali
WORSE ↓
Radical extremist groups have now seized central areas of the country, further adding to instability.

Sudan
WORSE ↓
A military coup in October 2021 has plunged Christians back into uncertainty, with persecution on the rise.

Nigeria
WORSE ↓
The number of attacks and killings has sharply risen, with more than 7,600 Christians killed during the period under review.

Eritrea
WORSE ↓
The situation in Eritrea itself remains the same, but Eritrean troops were implicated in atrocities against Christians in Tigray.

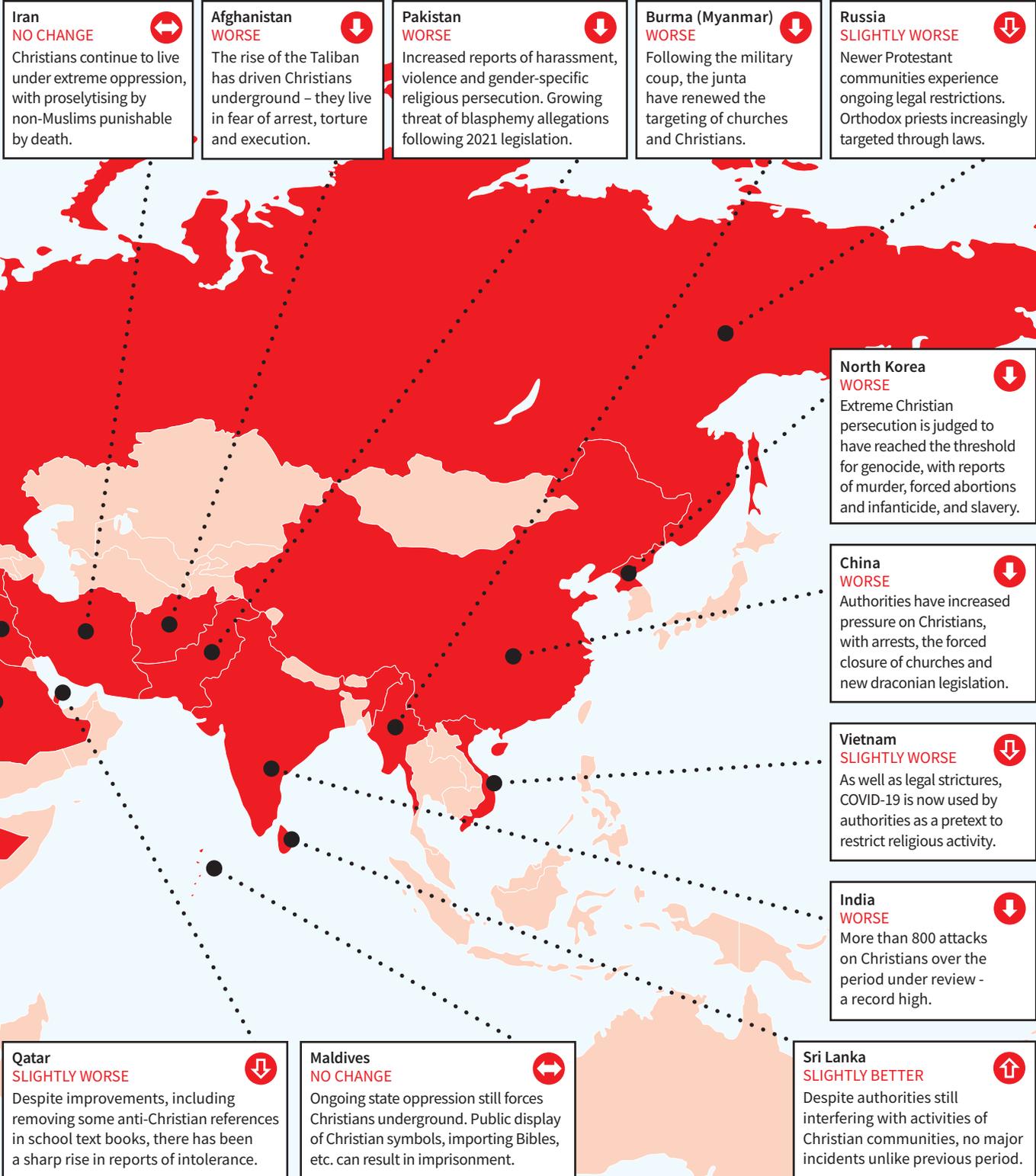
Ethiopia
WORSE ↓
The conflict in the Tigray region has led to increased attacks against Christians, including massacres and the destruction of historic monasteries.

Mozambique
WORSE ↓
Islamist attacks by Al-Shabab have led to the displacement of more than 800,000 and the death of more than 4,000.

PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS 2020-22

COMPARED WITH 2017-19

= Better = Slightly better = No change
 = Worse = Slightly worse





CHINA

Cardinal Zen's Arrest

May 2022: Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun was arrested on Wednesday 11th May by national security police, along with Margaret Ng Ngoi-yee, a former member of Hong Kong's Legislative Council, and Denise Ho Wan-sze, a singer.³ All were accused of colluding with foreign forces.⁴ They were all associated with the now defunct "612 Humanitarian Relief Fund" which helped protestors in financial need. If found guilty they could face life imprisonment. Hong Kong police told the BBC that the group was suspected of appealing to foreign countries or organisations to impose sanctions on Hong Kong, thereby threatening China's national security.⁵

Cardinal Zen was later released on bail. Matteo Bruni, the Director of the Holy See Press Office, said: "The Holy See has learned with concern the news of Cardinal Zen's arrest and is following the evolution of the situation with extreme attention."⁶

On 25th May 2022, Cardinal Zen appeared in court in Hong Kong and pleaded not guilty.⁷

groups led Church leaders to speak of "a systematic attempt to drive the Christian community out of Jerusalem and other parts of the Holy Land".

In Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, there is a lack of political will to uphold constitutional commitments to religious freedom. The adherence to *Shari'a* law trumps statutory requirements regarding rights for all. **In such places, Christians are a silent, unseen minority – and there is little sign of change on the horizon.** Such countries in the region still enforce a ban on church-building, the public display of crosses and other Christian symbols, and the import of Bibles and other Christian texts.

Asia

In varying degrees, from tightening constraints in Vietnam to an almost total ban in North Korea, **state authoritarianism restricts – or even strangulates – believers' ability to worship freely.**

While government attempts to regulate religious believers' practice of their faith are not unique to the region, they are characteristic of a number of countries in Asia. China continues to harass and attempt to control Christians and members of other religious groups that will not accept the official Communist Party line – making it unsurprising that in the Pew Forum's analysis of authorities' restrictions on religion it achieved the highest score of any nation state.¹⁷ In Burma the army has renewed attacks on Christians, following a lull during Aung San Suu Kyi's administration. Despite the junta's previous promotion of Buddhism as the country's social norm, they are now targeting pagodas as well as churches, as they attack anyone perceived to oppose their 2021 coup.

Religio-nationalism has also played a significant role in repressing Christianity and other minority faith groups. Afghanistan is the worst offender, with the Taliban imposing a hard-line interpretation of *Shari'a* law on society. The Maldives also rigidly imposes Islam, even refusing citizenship for non-Muslims. In both countries it is nigh impossible to estimate the Christian population due to the assertion of the Islamic faith as the cultural norm. In India and Sri Lanka religio-nationalism is not as all-encompassing, but leads to ongoing attacks against Christians and other minorities.

NIGERIA

Ondo State Church Attack

JUNE 2022: At least 40 people, including children, were killed when armed men fired randomly into the congregation at St Francis Xavier's Catholic Church in Owo, Ondo State on Pentecost Sunday (5th June). The attack occurred just as Mass was finishing and worshippers were preparing for a procession to mark one of the major feasts in the Church's calendar. This was the first church attack in the state in south-west Nigeria. Father Augustine Ikwu told ACN: "The identity of the perpetrators remains unknown while the situation has left the community devastated."⁸

The associate pastor of St Francis Xavier's, Father Andrew Adeniyi Abayomi, gives his first-hand account of the attack in the foreword to this report.

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Hindutva and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist groups have targeted Christians and their places of worship, and even police have been involved, arresting believers or stopping Church services. Political victories by religio-nationalist parties – Podujana Peramuna in Sri Lanka and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India – reinforce and encourage climates in which minorities are ‘othered’. This ‘othering’ also occurs in Pakistan where Christians and members of other non-Muslim faiths can find themselves vulnerable within society and subject to increased risk of harassment, arrest and violence – which in some parts of the country frequently includes kidnapping and rape. Majoritarian religious beliefs are seen as the norm, fostering the perception that Pakistan is a monolithic Muslim state, in stark contrast with Jinnah’s founding vision.

The advent of COVID-19 heralded problems facing Christians and other minorities across Asia, many of which started in early 2020 outside of the period under review. For example, in April 2020 ACN received reports that, in Pakistan, the local branch of the Saylani Welfare International Trust disregarded Christian homes during food distribution for poor families affected by the pandemic in Karachi’s Korangi district.¹⁸ This continued throughout the year with Islamic NGOs not helping non-Muslims where the aid had come from Zakat offerings – a form of religious almsgiving by Islamic adherents.¹⁹ There is a tradition of non-Muslims being ineligible to receive Zakat, although this is a hotly discussed issue within contemporary Islam.²⁰ **State violations of religious liberty during the coronavirus pandemic ranged from the well-intentioned but draconian to the calculated and outright repressive.**

Sri Lanka fell into the former category: Christians and Muslims protested against the Ministry of Health's imposition of mandatory cremation for everyone who died, or was suspected of dying, from COVID-19 – a measure far exceeding WHO guidance and offending against both communities' traditional norm of burial. Meanwhile, Vietnam used the coronavirus as a pretext for repressive action against believers, and scapegoated at least one Christian community for the virus' spread in Hồ Chí Minh.

Conclusion

Indicators strongly suggested that over the period under review the persecution of Christians continued to worsen in core countries of concern. Religious nationalism and authoritarianism intensified problems for the faithful – including the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, which prompted Christians and other minorities to attempt a desperate scramble to escape. Systematic violence and a climate of control meant that in countries as diverse as North Korea, China, India and Burma, the oppression of Christians increased. At the same time, escalating violence – often aimed at driving Christians out – meant that the faithful suffered some of the world's most vicious campaigns of intimidation orchestrated by militant non-state actors. Of particular concern in this regard is Africa where extremism threatens previously strong Christian communities. In Nigeria and other countries this violence clearly passes the threshold of genocide.

Despite governments starting to recognise the importance of freedom of religion or belief, the evidence of this *Persecuted and Forgotten?* report shows there is a long way to go to ensure the liberty of Christians and other minorities around the world is protected. Part of the problem is a cultural misperception in the West that continues to deny that Christians remain the most widely persecuted faith group. Speaking out against this “political correctness”, Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil, northern Iraq, told Parliamentarians at a fringe meeting of the London ForB Ministerial:

“There are still people being persecuted because of their faith... Yes, Christians are being persecuted.”²¹

Main Findings Notes

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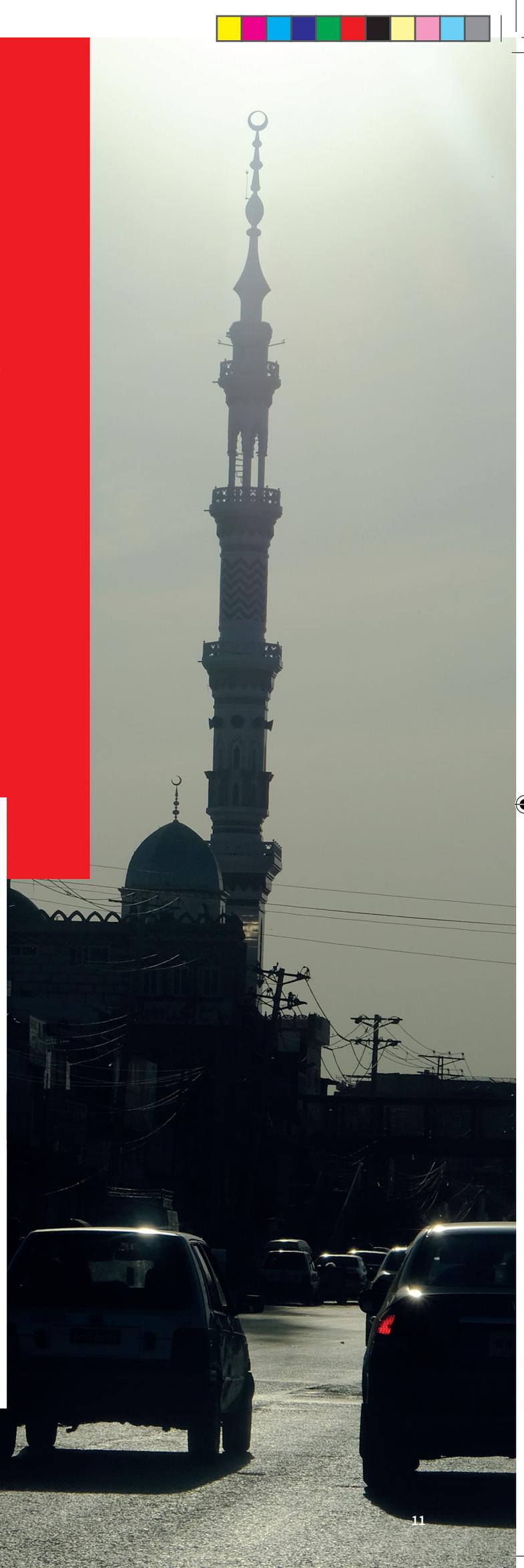
PAKISTAN

Kidnapping, horrors and 18 months in hiding

June 2022: A close relation of Christian girl Maira Shahbaz (*pictured below*) reported that he was continuing to encounter suspicious men determined to hunt her down. By then Maira had spent 18 months living in hiding in one room with her siblings and mother after being accused of apostasy.

Maira's suffering began in April 2020 when, aged 14, she was abducted by Mohamad Nakash Tariq, who was accused of raping her and forcing her to marry him and convert.⁹ In spite of a birth certificate proving she was underage, Tariq convinced Lahore High Court that they were legally wed – despite the imam cited in the marriage certificate disputing its legitimacy. Maira subsequently escaped.

Since autumn 2020, ACN (UK) has appealed to the UK government to grant Maira asylum, with repeated questions in the Westminster Parliament and several meetings with former Home Secretary Priti Patel.¹⁰





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Around the world, Christians are persecuted and harassed in more countries than any other faith. Priests are killed, the faithful are kidnapped, Christian women are raped and forced to deny their faith, churches are desecrated and communities forced to flee.

In the full *Persecuted and Forgotten?* report – a 144-page A5 book – we document the situation in 24 countries and show how ACN is offering help and hope.



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