



# Reports

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*Ronald Boyd-MacMillan and Dennis P. Petri*

African Countries Dominate New  
Anti-Religious Violence Database,  
but Latin American countries show  
alarming rise

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International Institute  
for Religious Freedom



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for Religious Freedom

**Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit  
Institut International pour la Liberté Religieuse  
Instituto Internacional para la Libertad Religiosa**

The International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) was founded in 2007 with the mission to promote religious freedom for all faiths from an academic perspective. The IIRF aspires to be an authoritative voice on religious freedom. We provide reliable and unbiased data on religious freedom – beyond anecdotal evidence – to strengthen academic research on the topic and to inform public policy at all levels. Our research results are disseminated through the International Journal for Religious Freedom and other publications. A particular emphasis of the IIRF is to encourage the study of religious freedom in university institutions through its inclusion in educational curricula and by supporting postgraduate students with research projects.

The IIRF has a global presence with academic and advocacy partners on all continents. We perform original research and in collaboration with our partners. The IIRF is also a “meeting place” for all scholars that take an interest in religious freedom.

We understand Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) as a fundamental and interdependent human right as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In line with CCPR General Comment No. 22, we view FoRB as a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected for all faiths in all spheres of society.



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## **African Countries Dominate New Anti-Religious Violence Database, but Latin American countries show alarming rise**



### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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Nigeria is by far the country where Christians are most likely to be killed for their faith. Azerbaijan the country where Christians are most likely to be displaced. China the country where a Christian is most likely to suffer arrest, and Nicaragua the country that closed most churches, followed by China in the 2022–2023 period. These are some of the findings of the Violent Incidents Database (VID) funded by Global Christian Relief (GCR) and conducted by the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF). The VID is a new instrument that tracks violence of all kinds against all religious groups in the world today.

Nigeria leads the charts with 2.444 killings of Christians so far in 2023 (Jan–Jun) and 4.877 in 2022, along with 1.234 abductions so far in 2023 (Jan–Jun) and 4.634 in 2022.<sup>1</sup> Most of the violence occurs in the north of the country, covering more than 50 % of the country’s territory, including the Middle Belt region. According to a pastor in Jos, “It is to our shame that Nigeria – half of it a Christian country – should be the country in the world where vast majority of martyrs come from.”

The second country where Christians are more likely to be killed for their faith is the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with 286 killings and 63 abductions between 2022 and 2023, followed by India (137 killings), Mozambique (104 killings and 7 abductions), Burkina Faso (83 killings and 8 abductions), Myanmar (40 killings), Mexico (27 killings and 15 abductions) and Honduras (21 killings), during the same time period.

If one compiles a “top ten” list, Latin American countries begin to show,<sup>2</sup> with Colombia, Mexico and Honduras, which reflects their lawless nature and power of organized crime. India comes in at number 3 although its true ranking could be much higher, but the Indian government makes it very hard to collect data especially in the conflict area of the Northeastern state of Manipur this year. But five out of the top ten countries are African.

### Top 10 killings of Christians (2022–2023)

	Countries	Killings
1	Nigeria	7321
2	Democratic Republic of the Congo	286
3	India	137
4	Mozambique	104
5	Burkina Faso	83
6	Myanmar	40
7	Mexico	27
8	Honduras	21

<sup>1</sup> The data on Nigeria was provided by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Africa ([www.orfa.africa](http://www.orfa.africa)).

<sup>2</sup> The source of the data on Latin American countries is the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America ([www.olire.org](http://www.olire.org)).

	Countries	Killings
9	Chad	17
10	Colombia	16

The countries of the so-called Sahel region have long been described as the world's most violent religious fault line, where Christianity has expanded up from the south, and Islam down from the north. The world's two missionary religions share what has become a new and deadly proximity along the 10th parallel. Islamic extremism is the main driver of the violence, with indigenous groups such as Boko Haram (started in 2002) and Al Shabaab (begun in 2006) in Somalia attacking Christians for decades.

But violence has spiked up around the region since 2012 with the incursion of more Middle Eastern extremist groups such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State. In countries like Mali and Burkina Faso, for example, Christians have been significantly driven from the north of the country by newer entities such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Comments a local analyst, "These newer extremist groups are better armed and better able to organize a criminal enterprise. They will also never run out of recruits so long as these countries cannot adequately educate and employ those in the 17–24 population bracket."

## Not just killings

The Violent Incidents Database tracks twelve key variables that constitute violence also, including arrests and detentions, closing places of worship, and forcing religious adherents to leave their homes and their countries. When it comes to the abduction of Christians, Nigeria remains by far the country where this happens the most, with 5,868 abductions in the 2022–2023-year period. But four Latin American countries make the top ten, including Mexico at number three, Nicaragua at number five and Cuba at number ten. The high incidence of Latin American countries on the violence lists reflects the power of organized crime and cartels in the region, who often target Christians in lawless areas because they resist the rule of the drug gangs.

## Top 10 abductions of Christians (2022–2023)

	Countries	Abductions
1	Nigeria	5868
2	Democratic Republic of the Congo	63
3	Mexico	15
4	Cameroon	14
5	Nicaragua	10
6	Burkina Faso	8

	<b>Countries</b>	<b>Abductions</b>
7	Mozambique	7
8	Haiti	7
9	Libya	6
10	Cuba	4

The three countries in which a Christian is mostly likely to suffer arrest were China (705), Eritrea (363), and Cuba (91). Azerbaijan was the country that saw most Christians displaced, and Nicaragua and China top the list of countries that closed the most churches. According to Dr Dennis P. Petri, International Director of the IIRF, “In Nicaragua the violence is primarily caused by the government cracking down on Christian leaders critical of the regime, leading to 69 arrests and the closing of 178 churches. In the other countries of the region, violence is primarily caused by organized crime and is expressed mainly through killings, abductions, and physical threats.”

### Top 10 closed Christian churches (2022–2023)

	<b>Countries</b>	<b>Closed places of worship or religious buildings</b>
1	Nicaragua	178
2	China	19
3	Angola	3
3	Indonesia	3
5	Haiti	2
5	Algeria	2
7	Cuba	1
7	Sudan	1
7	Dominican Republic	1
7	Kyrgyzstan	1
7	Nigeria	1
7	Slovenia	1
7	Venezuela	1

### Top 10 forced displacement of Christians (2022–2023)

	<b>Countries</b>	<b>Forced to leave Home</b>
1	Azerbaijan	120000
2	India	62255
3	Mozambique	140
4	Mexico	94

	Countries	Forced to leave Home
5	Laos	57
6	Vietnam	26
7	Chad	20
8	Myanmar	13
9	Nicaragua	11
9	China	11

### Top 10 arrest of Christians (2022–2023)

	Countries	Arrests/detentions
1	China	705
2	Eritrea	363
3	Cuba	91
4	Nicaragua	69
5	El Salvador	66
6	India	54
7	Mexico	30
8	Myanmar	22
9	Egypt	19
10	Libya	14

While the VID also tracks sexual assaults and forced marriages, very little information is reported about this in public sources. The limited reporting on sexual assaults in public sources may be attributed to the sensitive and often stigmatized nature of such incidents, leading to underreporting. Societal taboos, fear of repercussions, and cultural norms can contribute to victims and witnesses hesitating to disclose such information publicly. Additionally, legal and privacy considerations may further constrain the availability of comprehensive data on sexual assaults in public records.

The same is true regarding attacked Christian shops. Whilst we can assume this happens frequently in countries like India and in countries belonging to the Sub-Saharan African region, much information is not available publicly.

### Other religions

If we consider all religious groups, the top 10 for killings for example would include several other countries. During the 2022–2023 period, the VID records high levels of violence against non-Christian groups in Nigeria (10,415 killings, including 7,321 Christians), Israel (1,209), Mali (780 killings), China (104 killings), Afghanistan (120 killings), Niger (69 killings), Chad (41 killings, including 17 Chris-



tians), and the Central African Republic (38 killings). In most of these countries, it is likely that Christians are also affected by this violence, but data is often lacking.

Nigeria serves as a significant illustration of the Violent Incidents Database's purpose, which is to provide an overview of violence suffered by different religious groups based on the systematization of public media sources. In Nigeria, it is not only Christians who experience violence, but Muslims as well, with 832 killings so far in 2023 (Jan–Jun) and 2.262 in 2022, along with 1.019 abductions so far 2023 (Jan–June) and 2.691 in 2022. It is important to note that the majority of Muslim victims of violence were victims of the same perpetrators responsible for Christian killings and abductions. These perpetrators are mainly various Muslim terror groups (Armed Fulani herdsmen, Boko Haram, etc.), criminal gangs, and at times leaders belonging to African Traditional Religionists (ATR) as well as complicit members of security forces.

The conflict is highly complex, with various dimensions. Conflicts are inherently multidimensional, and Nigeria is no exception, where political, social, cultural, and ethnic factors intertwine with religious factors, creating an environment in which Christians and Muslims consistently face threats of physical violence.

## **Beyond physical violence**

Says Dr Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, Chief of Global Strategy and Research at GCR, “This is our first attempt at gathering the sources on violence from published and vetted sources, and it must always be borne in mind that such figures inevitably represent a major undercount, as many persecuted communities do not gather and publish data for their own safety, and hostile governments are increasingly sophisticated at baulking the collection of anti-religious violence.” But he added, “We believe that we need more instruments from public sources profiling religious persecution, so that we can inform more widely, intervene more effectively, and command more assent ... it is our goal to invite everyone to assist in better data gathering, and base their strategies of help solidly on what is factual because the persecuted deserve our best effort.”

Violence is only one type of persecution. Other kinds are more subtle, including pressure from society and family. This is tracked by another instrument that GCR is also funding, the updating of the Religion and State Project, compiled by Bar-Ilan University, which remains the most detailed profile of all kinds of religious repression suffered by all religions in all countries. Its first regional release of material will be revealed in the Spring through the GCR-IIRF partnership.

## Imprint

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