

House of Commons Library

Persecution of Christians

Research Briefing

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A Westminster Hall debate on the persecution of Christians is scheduled for Tuesday 8 April 2025, from 9:30am to 11:00am. The debate will be led by Ruth Jones MP.

The World Watch list 2025

The [World Watch list](#) is an annual report published by Open Doors, an NGO which supports Christians worldwide, and lists the 50 countries in which Christians face the “most extreme persecution”. A [parliamentary launch](#) for the [latest report, which covers 2024](#), was held in January 2025.

There is no internationally agreed definition of persecution. [Open Doors’ methodology](#) defines persecution as:

“Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians.”

This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalisation, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The report also assesses incidents of violence and acts affecting private, family, community, national and church life, and ranks each country based on the number and nature of reported incidents. The [report for 2024](#) estimated:

- More than 380 million Christians live in situations subject to “high levels of persecution and discrimination”. This [compared to 340 million in 2021](#) (PDF).

- 1 in 7 Christians worldwide live in situations with at least “high” levels of persecution and discrimination, including 1 in 5 in Africa and 1 in 7 in Asia. This compared to 1 in 8 worldwide in 2021 (PDF).
- 4,476 Christians were killed for faith-related reasons in 2024. 70% of those killed were in Nigeria, where attacks on Christians have become more common since 2020 as part of a wider rise in political violence against civilians. Open Doors estimates the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons worldwide was 4,998 in 2024, 5,621 in 2023, 5,898 in 2022, and 4,761 in 2021.
- 7,679 churches and Christian properties were attacked in 2024, around half the 14,766 in 2023.
- North Korea, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, and Sudan had the highest rates of reported persecution against Christians.

North Korea has been consistently ranked as having one of the highest rates of persecution since the World Watch List was first conducted in 1983. The number of countries ranked as conducting “extreme” or “very high” persecution has risen from 23 in 2015 to 60 in 2024.

Government actions on FoRB

The UK Government says promoting the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is a priority in its human rights work internationally.

Open Doors UK also published an Advocacy report (PDF) in 2025, which makes several recommendations on UK Government action, including:

- Prioritising freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and making it central to engagement with other countries and in international organisations.
- Ensuring the Special Envoy for FoRB has sufficient resources and to “consider establishing the role permanently in statute” (see below).
- Introducing measures to ensure minority religious communities are not denied access to aid because of their religion or belief.
- Targeting programmes to address gender-specific persecution.
- Ensuring Artificial Intelligence and other emerging technologies are not used to persecute religious groups, and to establish global standards to this end.

The Commons Library research briefing, The UK and global Freedom of Religion or Belief, March 2025, sets out UK Government efforts and policy to promote and protect FoRB. This includes:

- The prioritisation of FoRB in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's work (section 4.1).
- The role of the Special Envoy for FoRB (section 4.2).
- UK aid spending on FoRB (section 4.3).
- UK diplomatic activity, including through the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (section 4.4).
- Sanctions against those who abuse human rights (section 4.5).
- Analysis and reports on the effectiveness of UK work on FoRB, including by the government-commissioned Bishop of Truro report on Christian persecution in 2020 and the Independent Commission for Aid Impact on UK aid and human rights overseas in 2023 (section 4.6).

In the 2019-24 parliament, the then Special Envoy for FoRB, Fiona Bruce MP, introduced a Private Member's Bill, International Freedom of Religion or Belief Bill 2022-23 (Bill 373), which would have placed the role of Special Envoy for FoRB onto a statutory footing. The bill would have required the government to provide staffing and other facilities to support the office.

While the Conservative Government supported the bill and it passed all its Commons stages, proceedings in the Lords were not completed by the time the 2024 election was called and the bill did not become law.

In the 2024-25 parliamentary session, Jim Shannon MP has introduced a bill to put the role on a statutory footing. The Labour Government says it has no plans to legislate in the current session.

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