

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE WORLD

REPORT 2021

AT A GLANCE FINDINGS



Aid to the
Church in Need

ACN UNITED KINGDOM

Foreword

by **Father Emmanuel Yousaf**

National Director of the National Commission for Justice and Peace, Pakistan.

Over more than 45 years as a priest in Pakistan, I have struggled on behalf of our community against persecution and discrimination.

When Christians working in the fields and brick kilns have not received their due portion of wheat or rice, I have approached the landlords and kiln owners asking them to give just wages and put an end to this injustice. When I discovered that boys and girls in my parish were not receiving the education they deserve, I set up schools and hostels. I have worked in rural communities in which Christians were not respected due to their faith, and were banned from shops, restaurants and cafes; in such places, our faithful were not allowed to touch glasses or other eating implements used by the majority community. And we have supported girls from minority faith backgrounds who are particularly at risk. These are children who, despite the fact that they are only minors, are kidnapped, forced to convert and marry – and they also suffer rape and other abuse. The plight of these girls shows that living as a religious minority in Pakistan is becoming increasingly problematic.



And, although there have been some improvements, amendments to the blasphemy laws in the 1980s are exploited by extremists who misuse the legislation to terrorise minority faith communities. These poor and marginalised families live in fear of being accused of blasphemy, a crime which is punishable by execution or life imprisonment. I have been involved in many cases, not least that of Asia Bibi, who was on death row for nearly a decade before justice finally won through.

The case of Salamat Masih and his two uncles will stay with me forever. Salamat was accused of writing blasphemous comments about the Muslim Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The two uncles were also accused. Never mind that Salamat was only 12 and illiterate, never mind that the offending script was calligraphy and used religious language normally only used by Muslim clergy. In spite of this, the three were charged, but before anything could happen Salamat and his uncles were shot by three men brandishing automatic rifles. One uncle, Manzoor Masih, died of his injuries; the other uncle, Rehmat Masih, and Salamat himself were severely injured, but survived by the grace of God. Worse was to come when Salamat and his surviving uncle were sentenced to death. I worked ceaselessly with the family lawyer to overturn the sentence. Eventually, we succeeded. Sadly, the judge who acquitted them also was murdered in cold blood by the extremists. In the decades since then, we have worked hard to help rebuild the lives of Salamat, his surviving uncle, their relatives and 40 families from their village who fled on the night that the accusations were first made. I am grateful to Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) for its help to families in dire straits and its support for our advocacy for those falsely accused.

I am also grateful to ACN for its work in the field of religious liberty. Indeed, this Religious Freedom in the World Report could not be more timely. The more the world knows about acts of religious hatred and neglect, the more the world will be able to do something about them. In a complex and hurting world, the best safeguard against knee-jerk responses as well as ineffectual virtue-signalling is clear and comprehensive reportage, complemented by insightful and balanced analysis. This is what ACN's report is committed to providing. It follows cases of religious freedom abuses long after the TV cameras have gone and the story has moved on. The charity is to be commended for its thoroughgoing defence of religious freedom – a foundational human right which is no less important today than in years gone by.

Father Emmanuel Yousaf

National Director of the National Commission for Justice and Peace, Pakistan.

Main Findings:

Covering a two-year time-span, the Religious Freedom in the World 2021 Report (RFR) examines the situation for all major faith groups in 196 countries worldwide – every nation on earth. Involving more than 30 academics, journalists and in-country experts, the report provides a global and regional analysis of religious freedom trends. Since its foundation in 1999, the report has become the most significant research work carried out by the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need which is at work in 150 countries around the world.

Persecution of faith groups has gone into free fall in more than 95 percent of the world's worst-offending countries. The RFR 2021 found that, over the past two years, oppression against vulnerable faith communities has increased in all but one of the 26 countries listed in the survey's worst ('red') category. This report has also shown that new technology is being used to crush religious freedom. Main findings in this report show that religious freedom is violated in almost one third of the world's countries (31.6 percent), where two thirds of the world's population lives. 62 countries out of a total of 196 face very severe violations of religious freedom. The number of people living in these countries is close to 5.2 billion, as the worst offenders include some of the most populous nations in the world (China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nigeria).

Aid to the Church in Need's classifications are as follows:

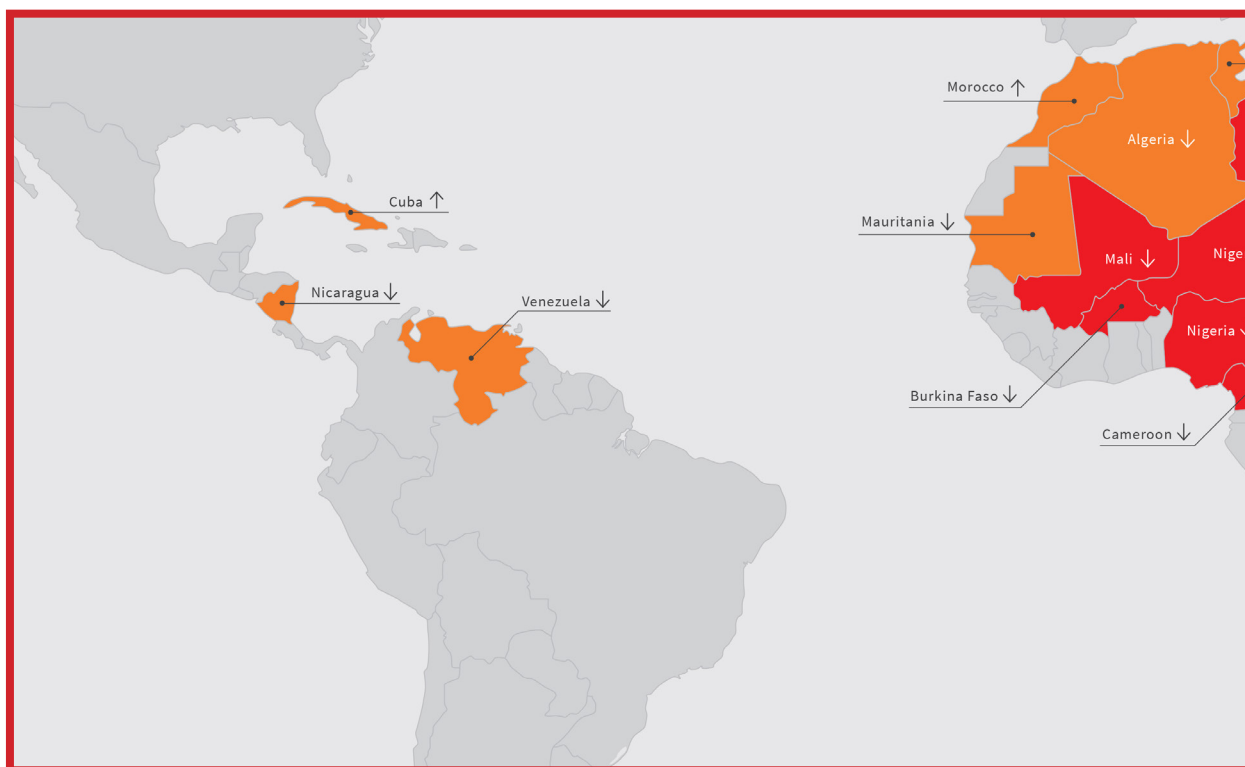
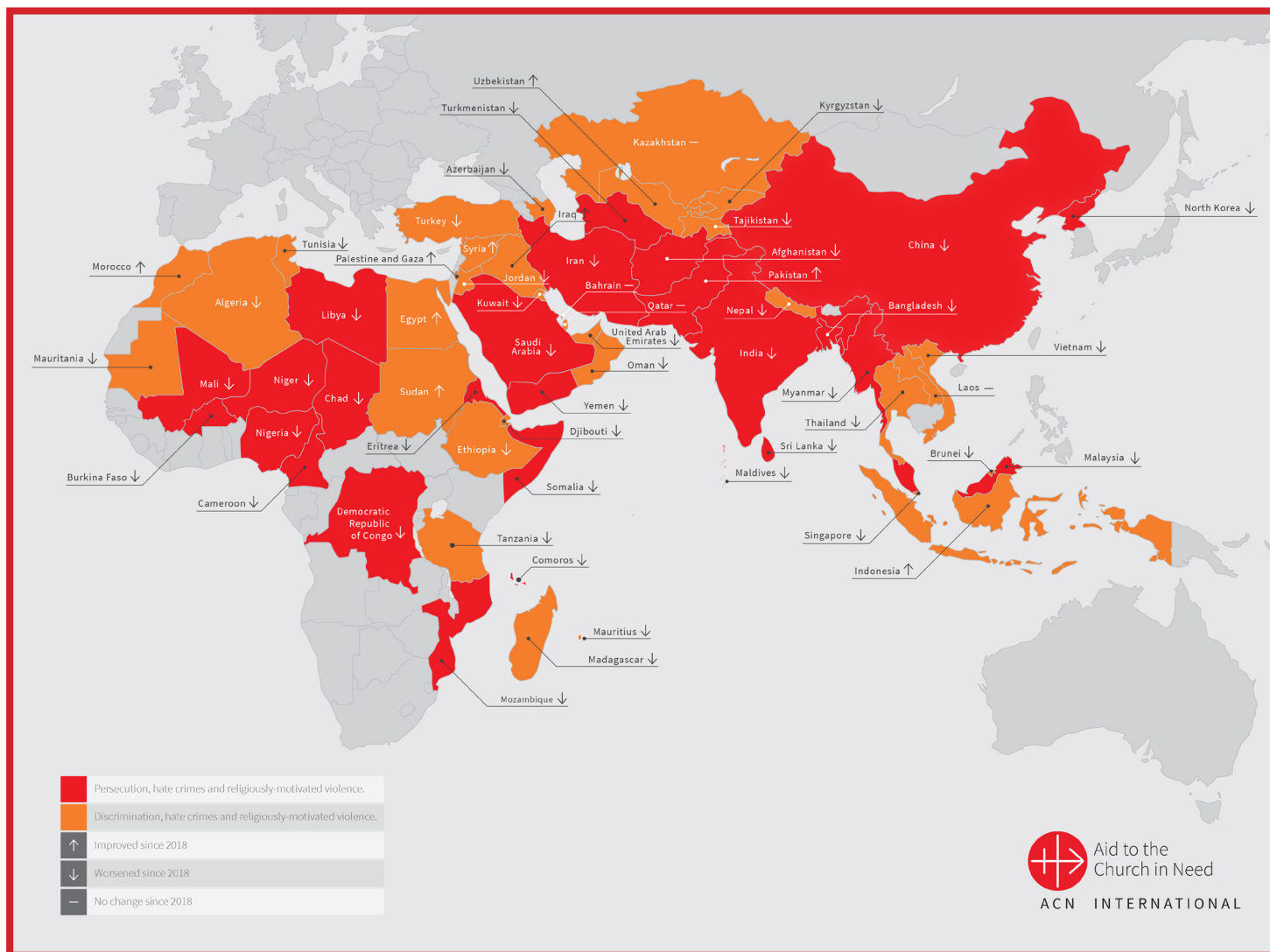
- **The Red category**, which denotes the existence of persecution, includes 26 countries which are home to 3.9 billion people or just over half (51 percent) of the world's population. This classification includes 12 African countries and two countries where investigations of possible genocide are ongoing, namely China and Myanmar (Burma).

- **The Orange category**, which denotes the existence of discrimination, includes 36 countries, home to 1.24 billion people. Slight improvements are identified in nine countries, while the situation in 20 countries is worsening.

- **The "under observation" classification** includes countries where newly emerging factors of concern have been observed which have the potential to cause a fundamental breakdown in freedom of religion. The Regional Analysis maps identify these countries with the symbol of a magnifying glass.

In all classifications, hate crimes occur in the form of attacks with a bias against religious people and property. The remainder of the countries are not classified, but that does not necessarily mean persecution does not take place at times.

Countries with significant violations of religious freedom



- The Religious Freedom in the World 2021 report, which covers all 196 countries worldwide, found that **digital technology, cyber networks, surveillance including artificial intelligence (AI) and facial recognition technology** were primary causes of increased persecution in many of the nations with the worst religious freedom record.
- The report described how the Chinese Communist Party were forcing religious groups in line with the help of 626 million **AI-enhanced surveillance cameras and smartphone scanners**.
- Identifying two principal protagonists of persecution, the report highlights **increasing crackdowns by authoritarian regimes**, such as China, accused of genocide against the Uighur Muslims, and others such as in India and Burma (Myanmar) where majoritarian religious nationalists are persecuting minorities.
- The RFR also traced **a rise of transnational Islamist networks**, which are “spreading across the Equator” and are creating a “crescent of jihadist violence” from Mali to the Philippines, taking in Comoros in the Indian Ocean, with the aim of creating what the report calls “**transcontinental caliphates**”.
- The report describes a “**cyber-caliphate**”, which has expanded globally to become a tool of online recruitment and radicalisation in the West. A terrifying prospect, showing that terrorist networks have a far further reach than ever before.
- **COVID-19 was also to blame for increased persecution**, according to the RFR, which found that societal prejudice against minorities, including in Turkey and Pakistan, meant that some faith groups were denied food and other vital aid.
- The RFR reported on **increasing cases of sexual violence used as a weapon** against religious minorities. Many of these crimes against women and girls have been reported by ACN and have happened in Pakistan. In 2020, ACN UK led a petition, signed by over 12,000 people, asking the UK Government to grant asylum to Maira Shahbaz (pictured below) and her family. Maira, like many other girls her age, was abducted, drugged, raped multiple times, forced to marry her abductor and forced to convert. She was just 14 years old. Thankfully, Maira escaped her captor but continues to live in Pakistan, with her family, in hiding. Aid to the Church in Need (UK) continues to lobby the UK Government on behalf of Maira, amid continuing reports of threats against her life.

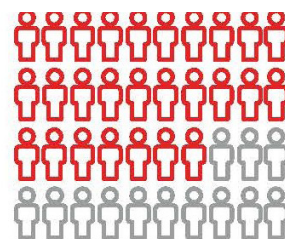


Fear and panic in Palma, Mozambique as Daesh (ISIS) seize town, March 2021. The insurgency in Mozambique began in October 2017 and has killed more than 2,000 people and left 670,000 homeless. This is just one example of the surge of Islamist terror that is spreading across Africa and other continents.



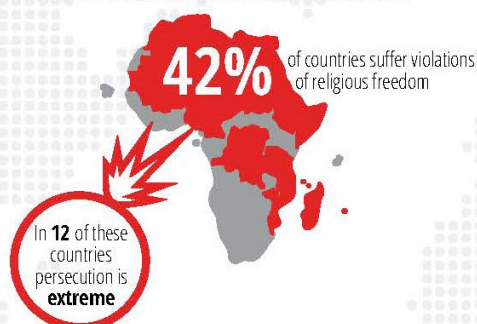
Maira Shahbaz, Pakistani Christian girl kidnapped in 2020.

- In the West, the report concludes, there has been a rise in “**polite persecution**”, a phrase coined by Pope Francis to describe how new cultural norms and values have consigned religions to what the RFR calls “the quiet obscurity of the individual conscience”, making it more difficult for people of faith to access the public square.

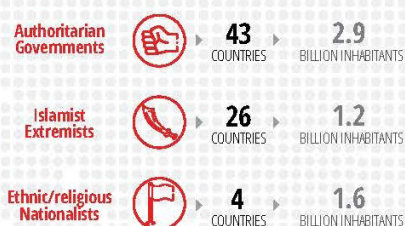


* In many of them religious minorities are the most targeted

VIOLATIONS IN 23 OF 54 AFRICAN COUNTRIES



WHO IS VIOLATING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM?*

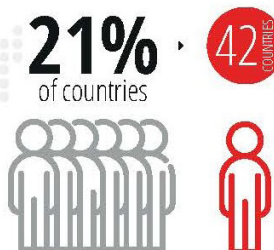


* Some of these countries are included in more than one group

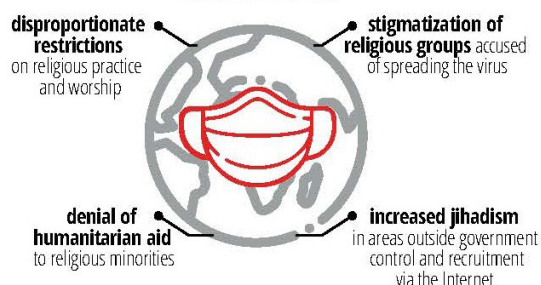


In 30 countries people have been **killed in acts of religious hatred** since the middle of 2018

Changing or renouncing your religion can have **grave** legal and/or social consequences in



IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



Reflecting on the gravity of the RFR’s findings, ACN International President Dr Thomas Heine-Geldern stated: “**Regrettably, despite the – albeit important – UN initiatives and the staffing of religious freedom ambassadorships, to date the international community’s response to violence based on religion and religious persecution in general can be categorised as too little, too late.**”

Regarding positive developments, the RFR highlights progress in inter-religious dialogue, noting the Vatican's role, in particular the declaration signed by the Pope and Sunni leader Grand Imam Ahamad Al-Tayyib of Al-Azar. Another example is the Pope's long-awaited meeting with Shi'a leader Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, which took place in March 2021.



Interreligious meeting in Ur. Pope Francis meets with representatives of the three Abrahamic religions at Ur of the Chaldeans in Iraq.

To support ACN UK in our work please visit our website to find out about our latest campaigns. We also invite you to support #RedWednesday, our annual campaign highlighting the impact and severity of religious persecution. #RedWednesday 2021 is on 24th November, please join us in standing together in solidarity for all those who have had their voice taken away from them. Find out more about #RedWednesday and how you can get involved on our website or social media. For further information on the topics explored in this report please see the 56 page Executive Summary. For advocacy and other updates sign up to our E-News at www.acnuk.org/newsletter.



A mother helps her son light a candle in the Greek Orthodox Church of Al-bishara in Homs. Syria, 2018.



Colombian nurse and missionary Elisa de Prada, of the Sisters of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, holds a newborn baby at the Catholic Health Dispersion Centre in Barsaloi, Samburu County, Kenya, 2019.