

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

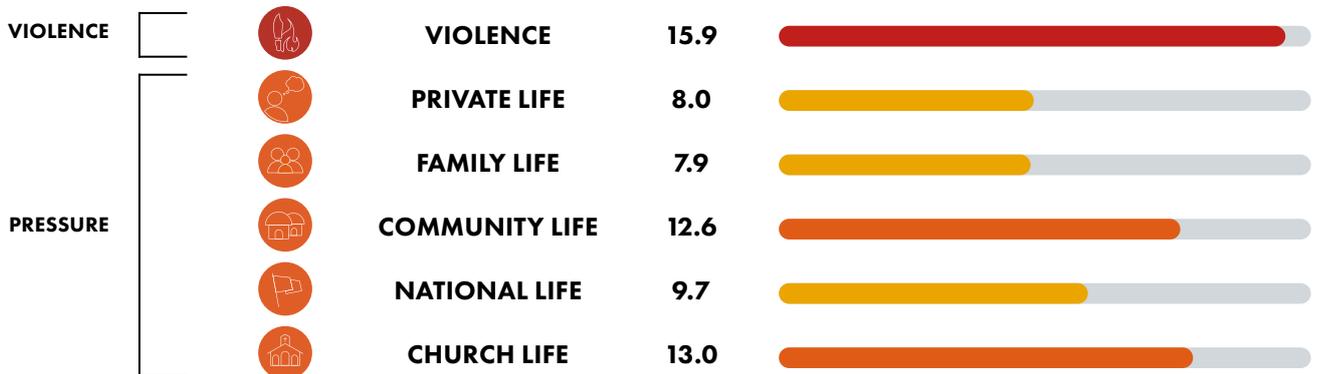
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (DRC)

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
41



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

In the eastern regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), notably in North Kivu, the situation for Christians has become increasingly perilous due to the presence of armed groups like the “Alliance for Democratic Forces” (ADF-NALU). This group, which has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS), has been particularly aggressive in targeting Christians. The scale of attacks is alarming: Christian villages have been burned down, pastors, priests, and lay Christians have been abducted, and untold suffering has been inflicted on Christian communities by the ADF and other armed factions. The area is a hotbed for more than a hundred different armed groups, making it extremely dangerous for anyone who speaks out against these organizations. Additionally, converts from Islam as well as indigenous religions face societal and familial pressures to engage in non-Christian religious activities. Representatives from the Catholic Church, who have publicly called on the government to respect constitutional electoral deadlines, have also experienced verbal harassment and various forms of interference due to their advocacy.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Felix Tshisekedi

POPULATION

98,152,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

93,396,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

GOVERNMENT

Semi-Presidential Republic



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	93,396,000	95.2
Ethno-religionists	2,341,000	2.4
Muslims	1,427,000	1.5
Bahais	406,000	0.4

Source²

DRC has experienced conflict for more than 50 years between a plethora of armed rebel groups. The weak rule of law has enabled violence, including abductions, detentions, and murders of journalists, to continue with impunity. Following a long-delayed and disputed election, Felix Tshisekedi was sworn in as president in January 2019. Although the President promised to guarantee the respect of fundamental rights and released most political prisoners, fighting between security forces and armed groups, as well as militia attacks on civilians, has continued to increase. Despite being rich in natural resources, DRC struggles with inflation and corruption.

A 2023 report by Freedom House presents the persistent challenges that DRC has been facing for decades: “The political system in DRC is paralyzed due

to the manipulation of the electoral process by political elites. Citizens are unable to freely exercise basic civil liberties, and corruption is endemic. Physical security is tenuous due to violence and human rights abuses committed by government forces, as well as armed rebel groups and militias in many areas of the country.”

In the east, where the ADF is the most prominent group, the situation has been exacerbated by interference from neighboring countries. The ADF is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States State Department.

Women and girls remain especially vulnerable to incidences of sexual and gender-based violence at the [hands of armed groups](#). Men and boys are vulnerable to forced recruitment into militias, as well as abductions and killings. Pastors in particular are targeted by jihadists.

How the situation varies by region

Christians face difficulties from Islamic militants who are active in North Kivu and Ituri province.

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

² Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This category is not included in the WWL analysis for scoring.

Historical Christian communities

Roman Catholic and Protestant communities experience violations from armed groups, such as attacks on churches and intimidation of leaders. During times of political unrest, attacks on church properties and intimidation of church leaders is common. From Kinshasa, the capital, to the central Kasai Province and, more recently, the eastern North Kivu Province, churches, convents and Catholic schools have been vandalized and looted by armed groups of youths or militiamen.

Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity (especially from Islam) are particularly found in North Kivu. They experience persecution from Islamic militants and pressure from their family and community. To a lesser extent, cross-denominational converts from Catholicism to Protestantism, or converts from African traditional religions to Christianity, also face pressure from their communities.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Baptist and Pentecostal churches are growing rapidly and are targeted by the Islamist group ADF-NALU. They also face discrimination by members of historical Christian groups.



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Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression

This is present in North Kivu, where militant Islamic groups such as ADF-NALU, along with people influenced by their ideology, target Christians and churches.

Organized corruption and crime

Ranked 169 out of 180 on [Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index](#), corruption (and impunity for corrupt activities) is rampant in both the public and private sectors. Christians who speak against it are vulnerable to attack.

Dictatorial paranoia

DRC has suffered enormously under different regimes. Former President Joseph Kabila postponed elections for two years without legal grounds. His supporters and security apparatus targeted Christians who voiced their discontent with his rule. The incumbent president, Felix Tshisekedi, came to power in December 2018 with a promise of cleaning up the mess and taking the country forward. However, so far there are no tangible reforms that increase Christians' protection against the attacks of rebel groups in the country. Corruption remains rampant, and the security apparatus remains unaccountable for their actions.

Clan oppression blended with ethno-religious hostility

Much of the violence in North Kivu, Kisangani and Kasai has an ethnic component. Some ethnic and militant leaders belong to cults or adhere to indigenous belief systems that generate hostility towards Christians.



How are men and women differently affected?

Women

DRC is politically, socially and economically complex. In various regions, women are commonly treated as inferior, impacting much of their lives, including access to their children and inheritance. Christian women can face abduction, rape, sexual torture and forced labor, especially by the Islamic radical ADF group and armed groups in northeastern regions. These attacks cause psychological distress and trauma, with the shame associated with sexual violence often resulting in family and community isolation. Forced marriage and forced divorce is also a risk, especially for converts, with marriages often early marriages.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied custody of children
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Trafficking
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

Men

In a context of violence and impunity, Christian men face maiming, abduction, forced recruitment into militia groups, forced labor, sexual mutilation, disemboweling and brutal killings. To escape kidnapers, men may be forced to pay ransoms which paralyze already impoverished families, impacting their finances for multiple years. Christian men also face discrimination at work and in accessing jobs. This persecution serves to weaken families and the wider church, especially when church leaders are targeted and if they have publicly denounced the violence.

Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Trafficking
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	41	67
2023	37	67
2022	40	66
2021	40	64
2020	57	56

Democratic Republic of the Congo scored the same as last year.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **January 2023:** IS claimed responsibility for [detonating an explosive device](#) inside the Pentecostal church in Kasindi on the Ugandan side of the border while people were praying. Congolese authorities put the toll Monday at 14 dead and at least 63 wounded (VOA, 16 January 2023).
- **March 2023:** The Islamic State (IS) group claimed responsibility for the [killing of 35 Christians](#) in Mukondi village in North Kivu province (AP News, 11 March 2023).

WWL Year	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians forced to marry	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed
2024	1000*	100*	261	45
2023	1000*	100	100*	100*

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

Private life

In ADF-controlled areas, any expression of Christian faith is dangerous. Jihadists have [killed](#) those wearing Christian symbols, and meeting other Christians can lead to abduction or killing. Inter-denominational converts (such as Catholics who join an Evangelical church) also face pressure and discrimination from family and community, and may even be expelled from their homes. Christians who have converted from African traditional religions are pressured to adhere to traditional rituals.

Family life

In ADF-controlled areas, Christian children can be abducted from school or forced to learn Islamic scriptures. Converts (either Christians from Muslim backgrounds or Protestants from Catholic backgrounds) can lose their inheritance and be put under pressure to divorce. Forced divorce is a means of punishment for the convert, and is also motivated by fear that ADF jihadists may attack the community as revenge for a member leaving Islam.

Community life

Christian businesses have been ruined by the ADF and revolutionary groups. Travel and access to education are difficult for Christians. In eastern DRC, the abduction of girls, especially Christians, by armed groups is common. They can be forced to marry group members. Christians are monitored by their local communities; they may be reported to the police, shadowed and their communications read or listened

to. In militant-controlled areas, anyone speaking out against Islamist groups risks severe violations.

National life

Violence against Christians can be perpetrated with impunity and Christians who speak out against injustice or corruption are targeted.

Church life

In conflict regions, violent attacks have left villages and churches empty. The government monitors churches and sermon content, especially churches that are seen as being 'unfriendly' to the president. In some areas, the government prevents church activities, alleging that they might turn into public disorder. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) has not issued permits for churches since 2014.



International obligations & rights violated

DRC has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

DRC is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian converts are ostracized and threatened with divorce and loss of inheritance (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian female converts run the risk of being abducted and forcibly married to Muslim men (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)
- Perpetrators of violence against Christians are often left unpunished (ICCPR Art. 2)
- Christian children can be forced to learn Islamic scriptures (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians are killed because of their faith by members of Islamist organizations (ICCPR Art. 6.1)

Situation of other religious minorities

The number of religious minorities in the DRC, including Muslims, is often a subject of dispute. The High Islamic Council of Congo estimates that Muslims make up approximately 14% of the country's population. However, this figure has been contested by some, leading to ongoing disagreements. Muslims in the country have voiced complaints about not receiving the same privileges and treatment as Christians.



Open Doors in Democratic Republic of the Congo

Open Doors operations through partners and churches in the Democratic Republic of the Congo commenced in 2016. Our vision is for a Congolese church that provides physical and spiritual support to persecuted Christians to enable them to be resilient in the face of persecution. We hope to achieve that through:

- Persecution preparedness training
- Trauma care
- Economic empowerment
- Discipleship



About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

Some of the photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
