

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

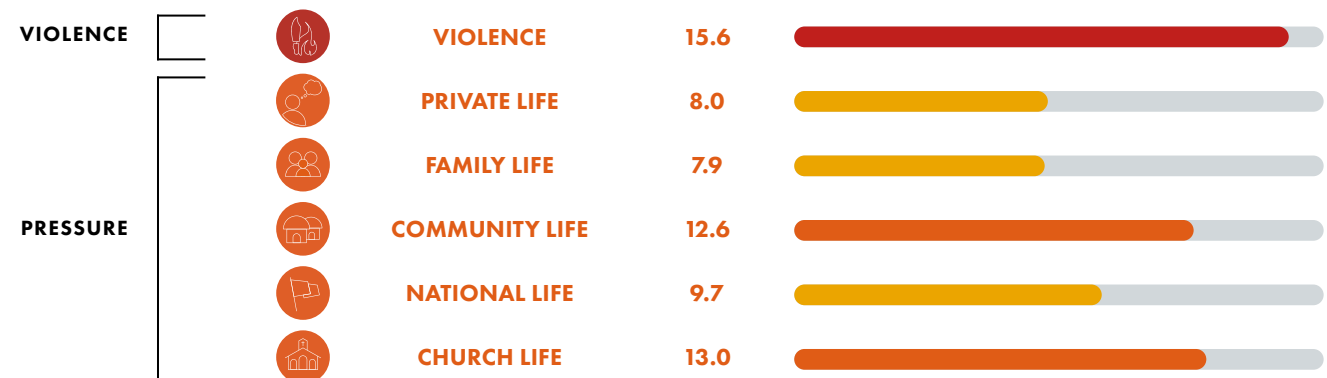
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**37**

## Democratic Republic of the Congo



### 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

The Islamic radical group, Alliance for Democratic Forces (ADF-NALU), is active in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The group attacks the local population, including Christian communities and churches, in Ituri and North Kivu provinces. In March 2021, the United States officially linked the ADF to the Islamic State. Converts to Christianity, both from Islam and indigenous religions, face pressure to take part in non-Christian religious activities and ceremonies. Christians critical of the government experience verbal harassment and interference.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Felix Tshisekedi

### POPULATION

95,241,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

90,570,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

### GOVERNMENT

Semi-Presidential Republic



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	90,570,000	95.1
Ethno-religionists	2,311,000	2.4
Muslims	1,391,000	1.5
Baha'is	398,000	0.4

Source<sup>2</sup>

DRC has experienced conflict for more than 50 years, and fighting between a plethora of armed rebel groups continues across the country. In the east, where the ADF is the most prominent group, the situation has been exacerbated by interference from neighboring countries. Under former President Joseph Kabila, weak rule of law enabled violence, including abductions, detentions, and murders of journalists, to continue with impunity across the country. The rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association and democratically electing a government were violated. Following a long-delayed and disputed election, Felix Tshisekedi was sworn in as president in January 2019. Although the President had 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, have continued to increase. Despite being rich in natural resources, DRC struggles with inflation and corruption. Around 72% of the population lives in poverty.

The conflict in the eastern part of the country continues to derail the peace process. DRC has great ethnic diversity, however, the most serious threat of all is that the eastern part of the country has become a safe haven for ADF which seeks to create an Islamic State in Uganda and has been targeting churches and Christians in north-eastern DRC for several years. This group 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 particularly active in Ituri province and North Kivu, in the eastern part of the country.

<sup>1</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

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

### Historical Christian communities

Roman Catholic and Protestant communities experience violations from armed groups, such as attacks on churches and intimidation of leaders. In Kinshasa, Kasai Province, and North Kivu province, churches, convents, and Catholic schools have been vandalized and looted by militias or groups of armed youths.

### Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity (especially from Islam) are particularly found in North Kivu and South Kivu Provinces. 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.



## 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 at 169 out of 180 on the [Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index](#), corruption (and impunity for corrupt activities) is rampant in both the public and private sectors. Christians who oppose 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 can save Christians from the brutal 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 their access to education. Christian women are vulnerable to abduction, rape, sexual torture and forced labor, especially by the Islamic radical ADF group and armed groups in north-eastern 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 typically happening at a young age.

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied custody of children
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Targeted seduction
- Trafficking
- 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 that paralyze already impoverished families, sentencing them to live out the next few years in even more desperate poverty. 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 violence.

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

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	37	67
2022	40	66
2021	40	64
2020	57	56
2019	54	55

*The increase of one point in WWL 2023 is the result of the expansion of the impact of the Islamic militant group ADF and other armed organized groups in the country. This expansion did not lead to an immediate increase in violence against Christians, but it has led to a marked increase in pressure in other spheres of life. In the WWL 2023 reporting period, Islamic militant group ADF caused much suffering in society for the Christian population. Armed groups also influenced the content of church leaders' sermons. Rape, sexual slavery, forced marriage and kidnapping were common in the areas controlled or affected by ADF. In general terms, Christians also faced restrictions from the government in many ways – including restrictions in free expression, licensing and operating in the country freely. It is a combination of these factors that has led to the increase in one point.*



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# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **July 2022:** Suspected Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) militants entered Lume, in North Kivu province, and burned down a health center, killing four patients inside. The militants killed nine more civilians before retreating into Virunga National Park. Infants and patients were among those killed in the majority Christians town, According to VOA reporting on 9 July, [Islamic State claimed responsibility](#) through its news agency.
- **June 2022:** ADF continued its attacks on Christian communities in eastern DRC by attacking the settlement of Mamove, killing six women and three men, wounding two other people and torching two houses. In a second raid later that day, attackers killed five men in Kisima-center on a major road leading to the Ugandan border.
- **June 2022:** ADF militants killed at least 10 Christians near the village of Makisabo, Beni, when they ambushed their three vehicles.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated
2023	100*	100*	1000*	100*
2022	100*	10*	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 with 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.

## 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, their communications read, or listened to. In militant-controlled areas, anyone speaking out against Islamist groups risks severe violations. In June 2019, an armed militia kidnapped a Catholic priest for [denouncing violence](#).

## 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 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 in 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

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2021](#)), there have been several attacks on members of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the interior provinces.

The government also used excessive force against the [Bundu dia Kongo](#) religious group, which resulted in the death of over 55 people in April 2020 in western Kongo Central Province.



### Open Doors in Democratic Republic of the Congo

Open Doors' operations in DRC 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 and trauma care
- Economic empowerment and 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: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

*Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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