



# Family Research Council Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief

*Regarding a Call for Input for a report on the rights of persons belonging  
to religious or belief minorities in situations of conflict.*

## Distinct Impact of Religious Persecution on Women

The distinctive and tragic impact of religious persecution on women and girls—who have unique vulnerabilities as females and unique challenges in societies that devalue and marginalize women—is significant across the globe. Two clear examples can be found in the situations faced by Christian and Hindu women and girls in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and Uyghur Muslim women in the People’s Republic of China.

NGOs continue to estimate that up to 1,000 Christian and Hindu girls are abducted and forced into marriage with Muslim men in Pakistan every year.<sup>1</sup> Most often, such forced marriages occur when a Muslim neighbor or acquaintance abducts an underage girl and forces her to sign conversion papers and a marriage license.<sup>2</sup> Women and girls in these situations face repeated rape, physical violence, and domestic servitude.

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<sup>1</sup> “2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Pakistan,” U.S. Department of State, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/pakistan/>.

<sup>2</sup> Arielle Del Turco, “Combatting Forced Marriage of Young Women in Pakistan,” Family Research Council, March 2021, <https://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF21C43.pdf>.

BBC News reported the story of a 12-year-old Christian girl named Farah who was forcefully abducted from her home and was made to convert to Islam and marry her abductor.<sup>3</sup> Regarding her struggle, she stated, “I was chained most of the time and ordered to clean the abductor’s home as well as take care of the animals in the yard outside. It was terrible. They’d put chains on my ankles, and tied me with a rope. I tried to cut the rope and get the chains off, but I couldn’t manage it. I prayed every night, saying, ‘God, please help me.’”

Christians make up approximately 1 percent of Pakistan’s population, and Hindus make up approximately 2 percent of its population. Due in large part to their status as religious minorities, Pakistani authorities are often reluctant to help the victims of forced marriage and conversion. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) found in its 2021 report that, “Authorities [in Pakistan] often do not take any action, and in abduction cases that are brought to the courts, officials have claimed that victims willingly converted to Islam.”<sup>4</sup>

When the parents of underage minority girls go to court to try to attain custody of their daughters back from their abductors, religious tensions often spark mob violence, and sometimes threats are directed at the judges in the cases.<sup>5</sup> Thus, political-religious insecurity in Pakistan directly affects Pakistani Christian and Hindu women and girls disproportionately. We believe that the United Nations’ efforts to address violations of religious freedom as well as violations of women’s rights should include a concerted focus on the issue of forced marriage and conversion in Pakistan.

For the purposes of this document, “insecurity” is defined as “a state of anxiety or fear stemming from perceived internal or external threats,” including “disharmony between distinct communities.”

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<sup>3</sup> Mike Thomson, “Abducted, shackled and forced to marry at 12,” BBC News, March 10, 2021, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-56337182>.

<sup>4</sup> “2021 Annual Report – Pakistan Chapter,” U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, April 2021, <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/Pakistan%20Chapter%20AR2021.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Reuben Ackerman, “Forced Conversions & Forced Marriages In Sindh, Pakistan,” University of Birmingham, 2018, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/ptr/ciforb/Forced-Conversions-and-Forced-Marriages-inSindh.pdf>.

Accordingly, the existence of Uyghur Muslim women in the People's Republic of China (PRC) is precarious, filled with danger and "insecurity" – particularly with respect to their reproductive, sexual and marital autonomy. In fact, recent revelations from internal Chinese Communist Party documents reveal that the policies, which target the Uyghur population due to their distinct ethnic and religious minority status, come directly from the highest levels in the Chinese government including Xi Jinping himself.<sup>6</sup>

Expert estimates suggest that between 1 and 3 million Uyghur and other ethnic minority Muslims in the Xinjiang region are currently detained in internment camps and subjected to "re-education." Survivors of the camps who managed to escape report instances of torture and abuse.<sup>7</sup> Witness testimonies suggest sexual violence against women in the camps are widespread. Sayragul Sauytbay, an ethnic Kazakh who spent time detained in an internment camp in Xinjiang, said the Chinese camp guards gathered one day and gang raped a female detainee, while other detainees who looked away or expressed sorrow or disgust were punished.<sup>8</sup>

Tursunay Ziawudun, a Uyghur woman who spent nine months in a Chinese internment camp, stated that men would enter the rooms of Uyghur detainees every night and select women to take to private

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<sup>6</sup> Adrian Zenz, ed., "The Xinjiang Papers: An Introduction," Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, Nov. 27, 2021, <https://twitter.com/adrianzenz/status/1465493819663667202?s=20> (especially, see the table on pp. 7-8); Patrick Wintour, "Leaked Papers Link Xinjiang Crackdown with China Leadership," *The Guardian*, Nov. 29, 2021; Josh Chin, "Leaked Documents Detail Xi Jinping's Extensive Role in Xinjiang Crackdown," *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 30, 2021; Shawn Fleetwood, "Marco Rubio Blasts New York Times for Hiding Xi Jinping's Role in Uyghur Genocide," *The Federalist*, December 2, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Roseanne Gerin, "Uyghur Tribunal Hears Grim Accounts of Rape And Torture in China's Xinjiang," Radio Free Asia, June 4, 2021, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/uyghur-tribunal-06042021174406.html>.

<sup>8</sup> David Stavrou, "A Million People Are Jailed at China's Gulags. I Managed to Escape. Here's What Really Goes on Inside," *Haaretz*, October 17, 2019, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/premium.MAGAZINE-a-million-people-are-jailed-at-china-s-gulags-i-escaped-here-s-what-goes-on-inside-1.7994216>.

rooms and rape. She and other Uyghur women who managed to be released from the camps and escape from China claim that organized rape is systematic in the camps.<sup>9</sup>

The Chinese government has also enforced a widespread policy of brutal forced sterilizations and forced abortions among Uyghur women in Xinjiang. This has contributed to the dramatic decline in the birthrate among Uyghurs, as evidenced by Chinese government statistics.<sup>10</sup> Hundreds of thousands of Uyghur women have been forced to undergo pregnancy checks, be fitted with intrauterine devices against their will, and subjected to forced sterilization and even abortion.<sup>11</sup> The United States government has officially determined that a genocide is ongoing because Uyghur women are being sterilized and compelled to undergo abortions involuntarily.<sup>12</sup> Countries including Canada, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Republic of Lithuania, Czech Republic, and the Kingdom of Belgium have also recognized the Chinese government's actions against Uyghurs as genocide.

Specifically through targeting the women of the Uyghur ethnic and religious minority, the Chinese government is currently committing the worst crime known to mankind. The United Nations must act robustly to affirm the human rights of Uyghur women and hold the Chinese government accountable for its actions in Xinjiang.

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew Hill, David Campanale and Joel Gunter, "Their goal is to destroy everyone': Uighur camp detainees allege systematic rape," BBC News, February 2, 2021, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55794071>.

<sup>10</sup> Adrian Zenz, "Sterilizations, IUDs, and Coercive Birth Prevention: The CCP's Campaign to Suppress Uyghur Birth Rates in Xinjiang," *China Brief* 20, no. 12, July 15, 2020, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/sterilizations-iuds-and-mandatory-birth-control-the-ccps-campaign-to-suppress-uyghur-birth-rates-in-xinjiang/>.

<sup>11</sup> "China cuts Uighur births with IUDs, abortion, sterilization," Associated Press, June 29, 2020, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-international-news-weekend-reads-china-health-269b3de1af34e17c1941a514f78d764c>.

<sup>12</sup> "Determination of the Secretary of State on Atrocities in Xinjiang," U.S. Department of State, January 19, 2021, accessed December 3, 2021, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/determination-of-the-secretary-of-state-on-atrocities-in-xinjiang/index.html>.

## Preconditions that Harm Religious Minorities in Situations of Insecurity

Insecurity is causing a crisis among Christian and other communities in Nigeria. More than 11,000 Christians have been killed in the Federal Republic of Nigeria since June 2015, and close to 300 churches have been attacked or destroyed since January 2012.<sup>13</sup> International Christian Concern reports that in the last 18 years, an estimated 50,000 to 70,000 Christians have been murdered by radical Islamic militant groups, while another 2 million people have been displaced.<sup>14</sup> Of these groups, radical Fulani terrorists have become the greatest threat to Nigerian Christians and have killed the majority of the 3,462 Christians who were murdered in 2021.<sup>15</sup> The terrorists groups Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa, as well as Fulani militants, target Christians for attack, causing displacement and committing mass kidnappings, abductions, rapes, massacres, and murders.<sup>16</sup>

Approximately half of the Nigerian population is Christian, predominantly located in the South, and the other half is Muslim, mostly in the North of the country, but both religious groups are scattered across the land. Some Christian villages are geographically segregated, making them vulnerable to being targeted for attacks. In June 2018, the human rights group Open Doors reported that Fulani terrorists destroyed a dozen Christian villages in a four-day massacre: “Most of the victims were in their homes sleeping when the attacks began . . . when Muslim Fulani militant herdsmen began their killing spree. . . In only days, a dozen villages in Nigeria’s Plateau state were wiped out. . . [A]s many as 200

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<sup>13</sup> Lela Gilbert, “The West Cannot Ignore Violence Against Nigerian Christians,” *Newsweek*, July 23, 2021, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/west-cannot-ignore-violence-against-nigerian-christians-opinion-1611828>.

<sup>14</sup> “Pastor Tortured, Killed in Nigeria,” International Christian Concern, July 28, 2021, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.persecution.org/2021/07/28/pastor-tortured-killed-nigeria/>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Lela Gilbert, “The Crisis of Christian Persecution in Nigeria,” Family Research Council, February 2021, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.frc.org/nigeria>.

Christians had been killed, however, some residents fear the death toll may be even higher, as more bodies are yet to be recovered, while others were burned beyond recognition.”<sup>17</sup>

The Nigerian government’s inability to properly assess the nature of threats to religious groups is a precondition to violence against Christians and others. Unfortunately, the authorities either do not care about religious violence or lack the resources to properly deal with repeated terrorist attacks against Christians. Either possibility creates a volatile environment which endangers vulnerable Nigerian citizens, particularly those living in rural areas.

Reports on the ongoing Nigerian violence repeatedly state that attacked villages and communities receive either no response from local authorities or such belated assistance that the bloodshed has ended by the time the authorities appear. This has caused deep mistrust between those who have suffered extreme violence and all authorities—from the federal government to local police. A recent study from the U.K. All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, *Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?*, states that authorities including local police should be required to invest in improved connections with communities in order to “gather better intelligence and respond more quickly to early warnings and distress calls.” It also suggests that police forces “should include members of the affected communities to help with establishing trust between the communities and police.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lindy Lowry, “A dozen Christian villages in Nigeria wiped out in four-day killing spree,” Open Doors, June 29, 2018, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/a-dozen-christian-villages-in-nigeria-wiped-out-in-four-day-killing-spreed/>.

<sup>18</sup> “Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide? An Inquiry by the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief,” All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/media/200615-Nigeria-Unfolding-Genocide-Report-of-the-APPG-for-FoRB.pdf>.

Moreover, the Nigerian security forces are suspected of playing a partisan role in sectarian disturbances. There have been several cases of arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, other ill-treatment, and use of excessive force, sometimes resulting in unlawful killings.<sup>19</sup>

In June 2021, President Muhammadu Buhari admitted his failure to end violence in the country.<sup>20</sup> Yet, the problems in Nigeria run deeper. The fact that President Buhari denies that Christians are persecuted in Nigeria at all undermines efforts to address violence, especially as much of the violence is targeted against Christians.<sup>21</sup> The lack of understanding from Nigerian officials about the true nature of religious tensions in the country is a dangerous precondition prolonging continued violence and attacks against religious communities.

## Particular Challenges for Religious Minorities During Displacement

While the plight of Rohingya Muslims in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar has been well-documented, the unique risks faced by Christians belonging to the Rohingya minority group facing displacement alongside Rohingya refugees is less known. Rohingya Christians have reported incidents in which they have been targeted by Muslims within refugee camps in the People's Republic of Bangladesh. In addition to being victimized by the Tatmadaw army which carried out an ethnic cleansing of Rohingya people in Myanmar's Rakhine State, Rohingya Christians are also endangered by the Muslim majority within the Rohingya minority.<sup>22</sup> In January 2020, Radio Free Asia reported that 12 Rohingya Christians were attacked in Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh, by individuals

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<sup>19</sup> "Nigeria," Amnesty International Report 2020/21, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.es.amnesty.org/en-que-estamos/paises/pais/show/nigeria/>.

<sup>20</sup> "Boko Haram: Nigerian president admits failure to end violence," BBC News, June 12, 2021, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57452166>.

<sup>21</sup> "President Buhari denies persecution of Christians in Nigeria In A Letter To UK Parliament," *The Nigerian Voice*, June 28, 2019, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.thenigerianvoice.com/news/279387/president-buhari-denies-persecution-of-christians-in-nigeria.html>.

<sup>22</sup> "No other conclusion,' ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas in Myanmar continues – senior UN rights official," UN News, March 6, 2018, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/03/1004232>.

that the Christians asserted belonged to an Islamist terrorist group who wanted them to leave the camp.<sup>23</sup> In February 2020, *AsiaNews* reported that nearly 400 militants associated with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army destroyed a church and 25 Christian homes, and kidnapped a Christian family.<sup>24</sup> The victims claimed that Bangladesh authorities did not adequately respond to the attack and ignored their concerns about being targeted for their faith.<sup>25</sup>

That status as a religious minority (including within a larger ethnic minority) provides additional hurdles during displacement. Religious minorities may need extra protection from security personnel or placement in separate refugee camps. Local authorities should receive religious freedom training and learn to respond to the needs of diverse communities. In various situations of displacement, the solutions will differ. Yet, in all scenarios, the United Nations should be working to ensure that all people have the right to choose, change, and live out their religious beliefs, even in situations of displacement.

As articulated by the UN Declaration of Human Rights, religious freedom is a fundamental human right, owed to all persons based on their inherent human dignity. While this right has come under attack from authoritarian regimes and nonstate actors, it is even more fragile in situations of conflict and insecurity. In these situations especially, the international community must be vigilant in protecting every person so they may practice their faith freely without fear of attack or discrimination.

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<sup>23</sup> “Christian Rohingya Refugees Say They Were Attacked in Bangladesh,” Radio Free Asia, January 27, 2021, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/attacked-01272020185528.html>.

<sup>24</sup> “Rohingya Christian family kidnapped, minor converted,” *AsiaNews*, February 4, 2020, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Rohingya-Christian-family-kidnapped,-minor-converted-49208.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Brad Adams, “Christians Abducted, Attacked in Bangladesh Refugee Camp,” Human Rights Watch, February 13, 2020, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/13/christians-abducted-attacked-bangladesh-refugee-camp>.