The Worst Places to Practice Your Faith in 2026: Findings of the Red List, World Watch List and USCIRF

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1. Case Summary and Facts

- Global Christian Relief 2026 Red List (released 8 January 2026; data 1 November 2023 to 31 October 2025, from the Violent Incidents Database maintained with the International Institute for Religious Freedom; Baptist Press, The Christian Post).
- Killings: Nigeria 590, DR Congo 447, Ethiopia 177, Russia 167, Mozambique 94 (total 1,972). Violence against churches: Rwanda 7,700, Mozambique 1,382, Myanmar 1,042, Nicaragua 1,023, Ukraine 678.
- Arrests: China 709, Russia 323, Iran 149, Vietnam 116, Nicaragua 114. Displacement: Mozambique 13,298, Myanmar 2,285, Nigeria 2,001, India 1,134, Mexico 875 (total 21,101). Assaults and abductions: Mexico 376, Nigeria 354, India 288, Ethiopia 183, Myanmar 161 (total 3,018).
- Open Doors World Watch List 2026: more than 388 million Christians face high persecution (about 1 in 7). Top ten: North Korea (first for the 24th time), Somalia, Yemen, Sudan, Eritrea, Syria, Nigeria, Pakistan, Libya, Iran. 4,849 Christians killed, 3,490 in Nigeria.
- USCIRF 2026 Annual Report (all faiths): 18 recommended Countries of Particular Concern: Afghanistan, Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, India, Iran, Libya, Nicaragua, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Vietnam. Special Watch List: Algeria, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Qatar, Turkey, Uzbekistan.
- October 2026 incidents (Ethiopia, Jordan, Syria, China; see Briefings 1 to 4) are consistent with the patterns these reports describe: non-state violence where states fail to protect, and state-driven restriction through arrests and closures.

2. Human Rights Law Being Violated

- UDHR Article 18 (including the freedom to change religion) and Article 3.
- ICCPR Article 18, non-derogable under Article 4(2); Article 6 (life); Article 9 (arbitrary detention); Article 26 (equal protection); Article 27 (minorities); Article 20(2) (incitement).
- 1981 UN Declaration, Articles 1, 2, 4 and 6.
- Genocide Convention (1948), Articles I and II, where intent to destroy a religious group as such is established on solid evidence.
- National constitutional guarantees of religious freedom in most of the listed states, which are frequently not enforced.

3. Current UN Instruments and Mechanisms

- Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief (since 1986).
- Human Rights Council resolution 16/18 and the Rabat Plan of Action; Universal Periodic Review.

- General Assembly resolutions 73/296 and 75/258; UN Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites (2019).
- Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide; Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.
- Limitation: all depend on state consent or Security Council action; Charter Article 2(7) and the permanent member veto block enforcement.

4. How Joseph Bonner's Draft Resolution Would Help

Title as found: “Strengthening of the United Nations system: UN 2.0 and Supranational Integration”

Working paper for the General Assembly's eighty-first session, dated 23 March 2026, submitted by the Human Rights Delegation/GHRTF (author: Joseph Bonner). The paper does not refer to religion, religious freedom or any specific country. Its provisions are general, binding governance mechanisms that could be applied to situations such as this one if they were adopted and the situation were declared a global emergency.

The common finding across all three reports is an enforcement gap. The draft targets that gap directly:

- Operative clause 1: transition of the Emergency Platform to a "Binding Operational Authority during global shocks that exceed national capacities."
- Operative clause 2: initiation of the Article 109 Charter Review process to establish a Supranational Oversight Council "with the power to issue mandatory directives that override national domestic jurisdiction in matters of global security."
- Next steps paragraph 4: Supranational Oversight Council mandates "legally binding on all Member States, notwithstanding the provisions of Article 2, paragraph 7, for the duration of a declared global emergency."
- Next steps paragraph 2: a "High-Level Panel on Supranational Oversight" to draft the legal bylaws for a Unified Global Response Force and "a binding legislative framework."
- Operative clause 5: Member States urged to sign the "Universal Sovereignty-Sharing Agreement" by the conclusion of the 81st session.
- Next steps paragraph 5: a Mandatory Reversion Clause returning all delegated powers to national sovereign control upon formal de-escalation, as verified by the General Assembly.

Application: for countries where armed groups kill believers faster than states respond (Nigeria, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique), a binding response authority and Unified Global Response Force address the protection gap. For states that are themselves the source of persecution, the challenge to the Article 2(7) shield opens the necessary debate. Charter amendments under Article 109 require ratification by all five permanent members, and the binding powers are limited to declared emergencies.

Status: the draft resolution did not advance. Joseph Bonner intends to bring it back before world leaders next year and is currently seeking Member State sponsors.

5. GHRTF Recommendations

1. Urge Member States to treat the convergent findings of the Red List, World Watch List and USCIRF as early warning data and to request regular UN reporting on the countries named across all three.

2. Call on the Human Rights Council to strengthen follow up on Universal Periodic Review recommendations concerning freedom of religion or belief, with public tracking of implementation.
3. Recommend that states with the highest recorded killings (Nigeria, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique) receive targeted UN support for civilian protection and accountability for attacks on religious communities.
4. Encourage states that have not ratified the ICCPR, including China, to do so, and all states to cooperate fully with the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.
5. Seek Member State sponsors for the draft resolution "Strengthening of the United Nations system: UN 2.0 and Supranational Integration" so that it can be reintroduced next year with a defined role for protecting religious communities facing mass violence.

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