

World Day against Trafficking in Persons: World's Worst Violators of Religious Freedom and Human Trafficking



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Today, 30 July, marks the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons. Jubilee Campaign has for years focused on a few major areas of concern: religious liberty, human trafficking, and women's and children's rights. When the United States Department of State released the new [2021 Trafficking in Persons Report](#) (TIP Report) one month ago on 30 June, we were unsurprised to see the overlap in nations that are both perpetrators of human trafficking *and* religious freedom.

The 2021 TIP Report identifies 17 countries as having the worst records with regards to human trafficking: Afghanistan, Algeria, Burma, China, Comoros, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Russia, South Sudan, Syria, Turkmenistan, and Venezuela. Interestingly, of these 17 worst exhibitors of human trafficking, 8 are identified in the [United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's \(USCIRF\) annual report](#) as Countries of Particular Concern for routinely egregiously violating religious freedom (Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Russia, Syria, Turkmenistan). This just goes to show that most countries in which religious persecution runs rampant also exhibit broader human rights violations.

For the purpose of this article, we will be focusing on a few countries in which

these areas intersect, or in which religious persecution and human trafficking are present: Burma, China, Eritrea, and North Korea.

Burma (Myanmar)

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In Burma (Myanmar), the military Tatmadaw has repeatedly relied on child labor and has even enlisted child soldiers in the conflicts it is waging in various regions in the nation, including Rakhine and Kachin states. COVID-19 has only exacerbated the situation; whereas the Burmese government has in recent years taken measures to demobilize child soldiers, specific battalions have been able to get away with child recruitment while the nation diverts myriad resources from trafficking prevention and punishment and to pandemic response. A secondary issue, moreover, is that the Tatmadaw's incursions in these states have forced thousands of ethnic minorities to flee their homes, thus making them more vulnerable to human trafficking.



The Tatmadaw, simultaneously, boasts a severely stained human rights record; in 2017, the military embarked on a genocidal campaign against the nation's predominantly Muslim Rohingya minority group, killing, raping, and massively displacing members of the group. Now, following the February 2021 coup in which the Tatmadaw overthrew the ruling political party and took control over the entire nation, soldiers have engaged in major human rights violations and extrajudicial killings against peaceful protesters and ordinary citizens. The nation's Rohingya community - with bleak memories of the 2017 genocidal onslaught - [have legitimate reason to fear](#) that they may be the next to incur the wrath of the Tatmadaw.

China

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The level of human trafficking in China has increasingly been exposed over the past year and a half, and it is impossible to ignore the ever-tangled relationship between trafficking and religious persecution taking place in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Since 2017, the Chinese Communist Party has planned and executed a campaign to surveil, predictively police, arbitrarily detain, and imprison upwards of one million Uyghur Muslims and other ethno-religious minority Muslim groups in vast concentration camp systems.



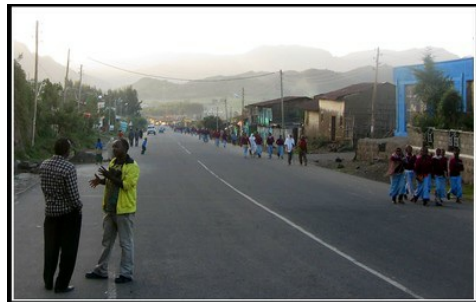
Recent reports, however, have begun to scratch the surface of the Chinese government's forcible transfer of Uyghur and other Turkic prisoners to other regions throughout China to engage in coercive labor. These publications have led the United States government to take concrete actions against trafficking in China, such as by [banning Xinjiang textile](#) and [solar panel products](#) tainted by Uyghur forced labor and establishing the [Xinjiang Supply Chain Business Advisory](#). But the entanglement of trafficking and religious persecution in China doesn't end there; the 2021 TIP report further highlights that "the government also reportedly placed ethnic Tibetans [predominantly Buddhist] in vocational training and manufacturing jobs as part of an ostensible 'poverty alleviation' and 'labor transfer program' that featured overt coercive elements."

Thanks to your support - the voices of North Korean women survivors of human trafficking in China have been lifted at the United Nations. Jubilee Campaign as part of the [North Korea Freedom Coalition](#) held a civil society event in conjunction with the Commission on the Status of Women. You can hear from the North Korean women survivors [here](#). Jubilee Campaign also delivered an [oral statement](#) raising the situation of the North Korean women during the Human Rights Council session. Numerous reports have also been [submitted](#) - ensuring that China is held accountable, most recently in [June](#).

Eritrea

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The national conscription scheme in Eritrea has been condemned by international human rights activists and organizations for decades. For Eritrean citizens, reaching the age of 18 is hardly celebratory; this coming of age is accompanied by conscription into either the Eritrean military or forced labor for seemingly indefinite periods of time. In recent months, the Eritrean military - likely consisting of conscripts trafficked into service against their will - has engaged in religious freedom violations in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. Ever since Eritrean forces involved themselves in the Ethiopian military's offensive against the Tigray People's Liberation Front, they have been perpetrators of mass crimes against humanity against Tigrayan civilians, Christian and Muslim alike.



[In late November 2020](#), Eritrean troops massacred hundreds of citizens - primarily men and boys - in the historically sacred city of Aksum, home to thousands of Eritrean Orthodox Christians. [Witnesses and survivors recount memories](#) of bodies littering the street, Eritrean soldiers opening doors to homes and shooting everyone inside, and mass displacement as a result of the violence. [In May 2021](#), a group of church deacons compiled a list of 14 churches, 4 monasteries, and mosques that have been damaged from shelling and looting by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces. Eritrean Orthodox Christian Patriarch Mathias highlighted the "rape of women, including nuns, and the bombing of churches in the region [...] at the hands of troops from neighbouring Eritrea."

North Korea

The North Korean government boasts a horrendous pattern of using forced labor and detention in labor camps as a form of political repression and punishment for citizens who defy the government; in fact, the TIP Report estimates that there are between 80,000 to 120,000 prisoners in camps throughout the nation, where "all prisoners, including children, are subject to forced labor, including in logging, mining, manufacturing, or farming for long hours under harsh conditions." Some of these prisoners include Christians and shamanism practitioners; their 'crimes' include simply practicing their faith, possessing religious materials or literature, meeting with other religious followers, as well as praying or attending worship services.



Korea Future Initiative, in its report [Persecuting Faith](#), reveals that five North Korean labor camps were identified as holding Christian prisoners and engaging in human rights violations against them. One Christian reported that before participating in forced labor for hours on end out in the prison camps' farms, prisoners are fed meagre 'soups'. "Investigators documented incidents of forced labour that were perpetrated against persons experiencing criminal charges based on their religious adherence"; prisoners were forced to remove weeds, harvest crops, and more while surrounded by barbed wire fences and chained with handcuffs.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is infamous for its religious freedom violations. A telling case is that of Raif Badawi, who called the Saudi authorities out for their persecution of non-Muslims and questioned why there were no churches in Saudi Arabia. Authorities arrested Raif Badawi for his stand for religious freedom and have detained him for over nine years. [During the #IRFSummit](#) the wife of Raif Badawi, Ensaf Haidar, shared her husband's story.



In addition to its religious freedom violations - Saudi Arabia tolerates the exploitation and trafficking of domestic workers. Recruitment companies in third countries entice women and men with lucrative job opportunities in Saudi Arabia only to exploit them when they arrive.

In June, Partnering with BPSOS, we could raise the plight of some thirty Vietnamese women during the UN [Human Rights Council Session](#) who were trafficked to Saudi Arabia from Vietnam. One woman's "employer" had not paid her in three years. The Vietnamese women are currently stuck in a shelter in Saudi Arabia.

The exploitation of domestic workers in Saudi Arabia is not an anomaly and exists in

several rich Gulf states and is one of the reasons several organisations have called for the boycott of the upcoming football/soccer World Cup in Qatar under the hashtag: [#BoycottQatar2022](#).

Nigeria

Nigeria remains a country of particular concern both for its [religious freedom](#) violations and also for the impunity experienced for victims of trafficking. The TIP report writes: *"The government's capacity to respond to trafficking cases in northeast Nigeria continued to be limited as Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa (ISIS-WA), and other terrorist groups killed hundreds of Nigerian soldiers, took additional territory, and displaced tens of thousands of inhabitants, limiting access to remote areas of Borno State."*



[A campaign](#) was recently launched calling for the release of slaves in Nigeria. More than [2000 people](#) have been abducted or kidnapped in Nigeria - many held captive by Boko Haram as sex slaves. Leah Sharibu [pictured] is among them. Boko Haram abducted her from her school when she was 16 years old and did not release Leah Sharibu because she refused to convert to Islam and held fast to her Christian faith despite the threats made against her.

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If you would like to take a concrete action today on [#WorldDayAgainstHumanTrafficking](#) in support of victims of trafficking

consider supporting the work of Bombay Teen Challenge. They do incredible work in providing assistance to survivors of sexual trafficking, restoring dignity and giving them a fresh start for them and their children. Mark your gift "Bombay Teen Challenge."

Prayer is also key - especially in places it feels humanly impossible to reach.



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