

FORCED DISPLACEMENT

How persecuted Christians are compelled to flee their homes due to religious targeting, conflict, violence, and human rights violations.



According to a reliable source, jihadists came to a village in Niger near the Burkina Faso border on Saturday 10 June 2023 and gave the ultimatum that Christians should either leave within 72 hours or accept Islam as their new faith. At least 69 Christian families left the village, taking refuge in a town and living under the trees despite it being the rainy season.

Forced displacement

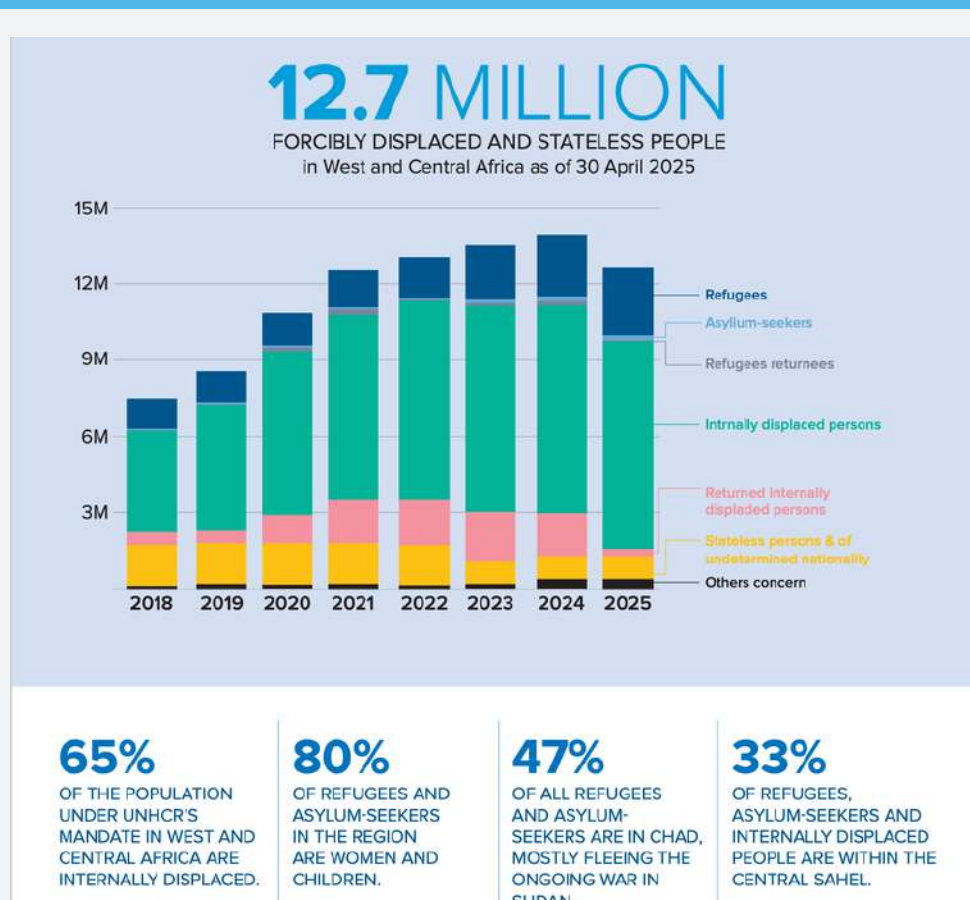
Forced displacement” is a term used to describe various types of involuntary movement, both within and across national borders. It refers to situations where persons leave or flee their home due to conflict, violence, disasters, persecution and severe human rights violations. This includes refugees, asylum-seekers, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and stateless people.

Forced displacement is an insecurity that can be a product of insecurity. When high levels of violence resolve or de-escalate, there is relatively little attention paid to the ways people experience violence in that new setting. While the majority of people who experience violent insecurity remain in their homes and face the challenge of rebuilding lives and communities, millions have already fled in search of safety, exposing them to further vulnerabilities.

Many families are forced to make deeply challenging choices. In some instances, men flee in search of work while leaving their families at home. In other cases, it is the wives and children who flee while the men remain, either to work or to protect their home. **Families and communities are torn apart** by displacement.

According to the UNHCR’s Forced Displacement in West and Central Africa, as of 30 April 2025, West and Central Africa hosted 12.7 million forcibly displaced and stateless individuals, including 8.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 2.9 million refugees and asylum-seekers. This total reflects a 48 per cent increase since 2020, when official figures stood at 8.6 million, underscoring a worsening forced displacement crisis. The number of people displaced and stateless between January and April 2025, stood at around 400,000 and was mainly hosted in Chad and the Sahel countries. However, compared to April 2024, the overall number of displaced people dropped by 9 per cent. This decline is attributed to improved data collection methodologies, particularly the documentation of IDP returnees over the past five years.

IDPs continue to represent the largest share of the displaced population. Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Cameroon remain the most affected, hosting 44, 25, and 12 per cent of the region’s IDPs, respectively— figures that reflect continuing insecurity and growing humanitarian needs in the Lake Chad Basin and the Central Sahel. The number of refugees and asylum-seekers increased by 13 per cent over the past year. Chad now hosts nearly half of the region’s refugee population, followed by Cameroon with 15 per cent. Most refugees originate from Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR), and Nigeria, which together account for nearly 75 per cent of the region’s refugee outflows. An estimated 631,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, mostly from Chad, Niger and Mali are currently unregistered, due to insufficient human and material resources needed to promptly respond to mass and continuing arrivals, posing challenges for protection and assistance. West Africa is also home to over 900,000 stateless persons or individuals of undetermined nationality, primarily in Côte d’Ivoire and Cabo Verde.



Source: UNHCR

Violence within displacement contexts

Fleeing violence does not mean escaping violence. As noted in Open Doors' *Church on the Run* report, refugees and IDPs are vulnerable within displacement contexts to further human rights abuses. **Forced displacement disproportionately impacts people with existing vulnerabilities**, such as women, children and those with disabilities. Members of religious and/or ethnic minorities, too, face heightened risks.

The forms of violence experienced within displacement settings are wide-ranging, including **physical, sexual, verbal and psychological violence, as well as the deprivation of a person's rights or access to resources**. Following the outbreak of Covid-19, for example, it was reported that in many camps Christians were denied access to aid, or given disproportionately less. An additional need is psycho-social support, as many struggle to overcome past and ongoing sources of trauma.

"I know in the Bible God tells us that his Word is Himself. It has been hard for me to live without my Bible. Now brothers and sisters have given me a new Bible. I am so happy. The past year without a Bible has been empty, now I am filled."

– IDP WOMAN IN NORTHERN CAMEROON,
WHOSE HUSBAND IS WORKING IN THE SOUTH

How Christians are impacted

Religious minorities are often heavily impacted by displacement contexts. For example, Rohingya women and girls in Myanmar are vulnerable on account of being female, refugees, and members of an ethno-religious minority. This combination makes them highly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, which can have significant long-term repercussions on their lives beyond the initial trauma of an attack. This is before considering other factors that may also shape their vulnerability, such as being a child, or having a disability.

Christian IDPs, too, have experienced violent attacks. In October 2023, experts shared that Fulani extremists attacked 11 women a few kilometers away from their informal IDP camp while they were searching for firewood.

They were raped in turns, at gunpoint.

These women and their families had all been displaced because of Fulani attacks on their villages in predominately Muslim northern Nigeria. "They remain vulnerable to further attacks on a daily basis" a local expert shares, "because Fulani herders have boxed them in. Fulani herders visibly surround the camps guarding their cattle."

Anytime IDPs leave the camp, it is a matter of life or death.

Attacks such as these are common across Nigeria, predominately in the North. In April 2023, a Good Friday attack on an IDP camp by Islamic extremists left 32 Christians dead. The majority of the Christians within the camp were women and children, in part because the men had already been killed or were seeking to run their farms and bring in an income.

During conflicts it is predominately men who are killed. In displacement settings the risk for women increases as there are fewer men left to target, or indeed protect them. The devastating long-term ripples on families and communities cannot be underestimated. As noted in the *Church on the Run* report, "the division of families through displacement also creates challenges that impact the emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing of children and youth."

The role of local faith actors

Displacement is a global phenomenon. So is the church.

In many countries around the world, local churches and local faith actors (LFAs) are uniquely placed to respond to conflict-induced displacement. As noted in Open Doors' 2022 report *The Faith Factor*, they have significant social capital and resources, an understanding of their community's psychosocial and spiritual needs, are well-trusted and have a longer-term commitment to an area than other humanitarian organizations.

In Sudan, nuns have opened up their home to take in IDPs, including those from other faith backgrounds. In Cameroon, LFAs have provided Christian IDPs with relief packages that included a Bible.

"That's why we live with the Sudanese whether they are Christian or not, in joyful time and sorrow time."

– SUDANESE NUN WHO IS HOSTING IDPS

The response of LFAs includes gender-specific responses.

The Shalom Trauma Center in Nigeria, for example, offers long-term support to trauma victims, as well as training to Church leaders in how to provide trauma care. This includes supporting victims of gender-based violence and sexual assaults.