



Photo: Sean Sheridan

world relief 

 **OpenDoors**

# **CLOSED DOORS:**

**Persecuted Christians and the U.S. Refugee  
Resettlement and Asylum Processes**



Photo: Yong Yuan

## A Letter From Scott Arbeiter, President of World Relief, Tim Breene, CEO of World Relief & David Curry, CEO of Open Doors USA

Religious liberty has often been heralded as the “first freedom” enumerated in the U.S. Constitution. The freedom to practice one’s faith, without governmental coercion, restriction or persecution, should belong to all people, in all countries, of all religious traditions and none. As Christians, we believe that religious liberty is an inalienable right, endowed by God, that can be neither bestowed nor withheld by any government.

Tragically though, as U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback has [noted](#), “the religious freedom central to our experience at home is still encroached upon in many areas of the world.” In the 50 countries on Open Doors’ annual World Watch List, for example, Christians are facing life-threatening violence and persecution for their faith. In some cases, they have concluded that their only option is to escape, fleeing their country and becoming refugees in a foreign land. If they cannot find a safe place to receive them – if they are returned against their will – they are likely to be persecuted and, in some cases, *martyred*.

Historically – at least at our noblest moments – the U.S. has stood as a beacon of safety and freedom for those persecuted for their faith, including many persecuted Christians. The current administration has recently made unprecedented levels of assistance available to religious minorities worldwide. In addition, a new category established in the fiscal year 2020 refugee resettlement program prioritizes religious minorities to be resettled to the United States.

However, as the statistics and stories within this report demonstrate, the number of persecuted Christians to whom protection is available through the U.S. refugee resettlement program and the application of asylum laws has still been dramatically curtailed. With further restrictions on the near horizon, our aim with this report is to raise awareness and call the American Church both to prayer and advocacy for the persecuted. We also hope Congress and the administration will strengthen U.S. commitment to the persecuted through the refugee and asylum processes.

To be clear, we both share a commitment that all people are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and thus are worthy of protection from persecution, whether they are persecuted for their faith in Christ, for another religious belief, for a political opinion or ethnicity or for any other reason. Our call to love our neighbors, Jesus makes clear in his parable of the Good Samaritan, includes those of other faiths. We are certainly not arguing that the U.S. should provide protection exclusively to persecuted Christians.

We do unabashedly believe, however, immigration and asylum policies must be addressed in order to protect those who, because of persecution on account of their faith in Christ, have been forced to flee their countries. Scripture teaches us that the global Church is a single body, and that when one part suffers, we all are to suffer with it (1 Corinthians 12:26).

We are one family in Christ, and we ought not sit silently as our brothers and sisters suffer. We can only speak up, though, if we are accurately informed. The reality is that many American Christians are unaware of the threats that members of our family face beyond our borders, and of the ways our own country has, in some cases, closed its doors to these brothers and sisters seeking refuge.

Our prayer is that the sobering realities outlined in this report would spur the Church to stand together, as one family, advocating for the most vulnerable among us for His glory.

*In Christ,*



**Scott Arbeiter,**  
President, *World Relief*



**Tim Breene,**  
CEO, *World Relief*



**David Curry,**  
CEO, *Open Doors USA*





Photo: David Uttley

## Introduction

Nearly [eighty million](#) people across the globe are victims of forced displacement. 40 percent of them are children, and 80 percent come from countries struggling with food insecurity and malnutrition. Twenty-six million meet the formal definition of a refugee, having fled their countries because of a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, political opinion, national origin, or membership in a particular social group. War, trauma and other major social and economic disruptions drive millions more to migrate in search of better work opportunities and a safer place to call home.

A significant share of refugees worldwide are persecuted particularly because of their religion, including many who are persecuted for their Christian faith. Globally, more than [260 million Christians](#) face high levels of persecution for their faith. When individuals facing violence and pressure at home determine it is no longer safe to remain, some make the difficult decision to migrate – hoping and praying to find a safe country that will welcome them.

The United States has long set the standard for the global agenda on refugees and asylum seekers. Yet recent shifts in U.S. policy reveal that it is no longer the safe haven for displaced persons that it once was: The “Golden Door” that Emma Lazarus poetically described as the gateway to safety and liberty for those “yearning to breathe free” has largely closed shut in recent years.

The coronavirus pandemic has only aggravated existing conditions of hardship for the world’s refugees and other displaced people. COVID-19 disproportionately affects the poor and underprivileged, and many of the world’s densely-packed and underfunded refugee camps are [ill-equipped](#) to handle the medical needs of the many refugees they house. With [134 refugee-hosting countries](#) reporting local transmission of COVID-19, the pandemic is an especially dangerous threat to displaced persons across the globe. But as many of the world’s wealthier countries battle the pandemic domestically and tighten foreign travel restrictions, the political climate has become unfavorable to displaced people who desperately need global aid, exacerbating trends that began even before the global health crisis.

While the United States has made religious freedom a priority of domestic and foreign policy, religious persecution continues to drive the displacement of Christians. The administration’s commitment to religious freedom necessitates an equally enduring responsibility toward refugees and asylum seekers.

It is the time for global leaders to recognize the dire situation for displaced persons, including persecuted Christians, and take action. And it is vital that American Christians leverage their voices on behalf of the most vulnerable, defending the human rights of displaced people, including brothers and sisters in Christ.



Photo: Jordan Halland

## Meet Sunny and Arooj

### Pakistan

After experiencing threats and fearing for their lives as Christians in Pakistan, Sunny\* and his newlywed wife, Arooj, were planning to flee the country – but before they could escape, Sunny was kidnapped, tortured and left to die. Arooj, believing her husband was dead, continued with their plan to escape to Sri Lanka. Only once there did she learn her husband had survived. Because Arooj feared being deported back to Pakistan, she decided to pursue the opportunity to be resettled as a refugee in the United States. Four years later, she was welcomed by World Relief to Spokane, Washington.

Sunny has since reached Sri Lanka, where he has now been waiting for four years to be resettled to the U.S. and reunited with his wife. Sri Lanka has experienced dramatic persecution of Christians as well in recent years and is not a safe place to remain as a Pakistani Christian. Arooj and Sunny pray for the day when they will be safely reunited in the United States – and ask you to join them in prayer and advocacy.

*\* Some names have been changed to protect the safety of individuals who may still actively be at risk of persecution for their faith.*



Photo: Sean Sheridan

## Global Persecution of Christians

Today, at least [260 million Christians](#) live under the threat of persecution in countries that hinder, outlaw or otherwise oppress the expression of the Christian faith. Christians face some of the most severe persecution in authoritarian countries, such as North Korea, Iran, Myanmar, China and Eritrea. These and other oppressive governments restrict Christian freedom of religion and impose harsh, sometimes debilitating, penalties on Christian conduct and expression.

In its 2020 [World Watch List](#), a research-based overview of religious freedom conditions for Christians worldwide, Open Doors USA has identified several current global trends that contribute to Christian persecution. Chief among them is the power of anti-Christian governments to arrest and execute Christians for practicing their faith. This past year alone, at least 2,983 Christians have been killed for their faith, while 3,711 have been arrested and imprisoned. But hostility to Christians doesn't always come directly from the government. Social pressures, cultural norms and religious antipathies can also contribute to the persecution of Christians. For example, Christians living in Afghanistan, where conversion from Islam to Christianity is considered both socially dangerous and criminal, must confront intense familial, clan-based and ethnic antagonism from their social peers.

Tragically, these religious antipathies often find expression in religious extremist violence against Christians. This kind of violence from militant religious factions is increasingly common across many areas of the globe, but especially so in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast and South Asia, where governments struggle to control extremist groups such as Boko Haram and other ISIS-affiliated clans. In Afghanistan, the Taliban controls increasingly large parts of the country and targets religious minorities who face violence and persecution. In Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq and Syria, longstanding conflict has led to the near-extinction of historic Christian communities that have existed since the days of the early Church. Wherever religious extremists can operate unchecked, many Christians fear for their lives and their livelihoods.



Photo: Kevin Kubota and Marianne Bach

As a result, Christians around the world are forced to choose between exposing their families to life-threatening risk at home or fleeing persecution to seek refugee status or asylum in foreign countries. Should they choose to flee, they face an uncertain future, full of its own risks and dangers. But for far too many Christians, choosing the uncertain and vulnerable life of a refugee is the only way to keep themselves and their families safe from harm.

### The U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program

Under both [U.S.](#) and [international](#) law, a refugee is an individual who has left her country of origin and who has a credible fear of persecution on account of their race, religion, political opinion, national origin or membership in a particular social group. Refugees are unable to find protection from their local governments and must seek safety and survival elsewhere.

While most refugees would prefer to return home if it were safe, in many cases the ongoing threat of persecution makes that impossible. Until they are either granted permanent protection in the first country to which they fled or are offered resettlement elsewhere, refugees wait, either in refugee camps or in urban settings, where they usually lack permission to work and provide for themselves. Often refugees face [additional persecution](#) in transitional settings, including relief discrimination and violent attacks targeting Christians and other religious minorities. Since 1980, when the Refugee Act became law and

formalized the U.S. refugee resettlement program, more than 3 million refugees have been resettled to the U.S. Over the past decade, the plurality of resettled refugees have been Christians, including many persecuted particularly for their faith. Each undergoes a thorough security and health screening prior to resettlement. As a [report](#) from The Heritage Foundation notes, “refugees undergo more vetting than any other immigrants to the U.S.” For the relatively small share of the world’s refugees whom the U.S. government selects and approves for resettlement, the U.S. State Department partners with a variety of faith-based and other nonprofit organizations, including World Relief, to assist refugees in their process of cultural adjustment.

In the past, the U.S. has been the global leader in refugee resettlement. Under the authority of the Refugee Act of 1980, the president sets an annual ceiling for refugee resettlement: [On average](#), from 1980 through 2016, that upper limit for resettlement was set at roughly 95,000, with an average of approximately 81,000 refugees actually arriving annually.

In recent years, however, the U.S. has dramatically reduced its commitment to refugee resettlement. After resettling roughly [97,000 refugees in 2016](#), the refugee ceiling has been reduced each year. In 2018, Canada surpassed the U.S. as the leader in refugee resettlement, welcoming approximately 28,000 refugees compared to the U.S.’s 22,874, despite a far smaller population overall.



Photo: Kristina Jovanovic

## Meet Mana

### Iran

Mana\* grew up in a nominally Muslim family in Tehran, Iran. As an adult, she heard the gospel and made the decision to follow Jesus. In time, she began hosting an illegal house church. Eventually, Mana's home was raided, and her oldest son was imprisoned.

Mana concluded that fleeing Iran was necessary to keep herself and her younger son safe. They lived in challenging conditions in Turkey for two-and-a-half years before being accepted by the U.S. refugee resettlement program and allowed to rebuild their lives in northeast Ohio.

Mana now fears for her older son, who was released from jail in Iran and also escaped to Turkey, where he now lives as a refugee. His odds of resettlement to the U.S. are slim, however, as just 25 Iranian Christians have been resettled to the U.S. as refugees in the first half of 2020; the U.S. is on track to receive 97 percent fewer Iranian Christian refugees this year than when Mana was resettled in 2015

*\* Some names have been changed to protect the safety of individuals who may still actively be at risk of persecution for their faith.*

For fiscal year 2020, the refugee ceiling was set at a maximum of 18,000. However, in part because of the COVID-19 pandemic, fewer than 7,600 refugees have been resettled with just three months remaining in the fiscal year and the resettlement program still largely halted.

The situation for refugees globally may only become more bleak if other resettlement countries such as [Canada](#), [Australia and the U.K.](#) follow U.S. example and reduce the number of refugees whom they resettle. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [estimates](#) that 1.4 million refugees are in need of resettlement in 2020, but in 2019, only 4.5 percent of global resettlement needs were met. As religious persecution around the world rises and the numbers of refugees accepted into the U.S. and other countries continue to drastically decline, more Christians than ever before are facing religious persecution without any hope of resettlement.

In September 2019, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), chaired by Tony Perkins, warned against the consequences of further cuts to refugee resettlement numbers, [encouraging](#) the administration to restore the number of refugees to the historic norm of 95,000. The USCIRF [commended](#) the Trump administration for its commitment to promoting international religious freedom abroad but urged it to extend these efforts to U.S. refugee resettlement policy so that the U.S. would continue to be a safe haven for refugees fleeing religious persecution.

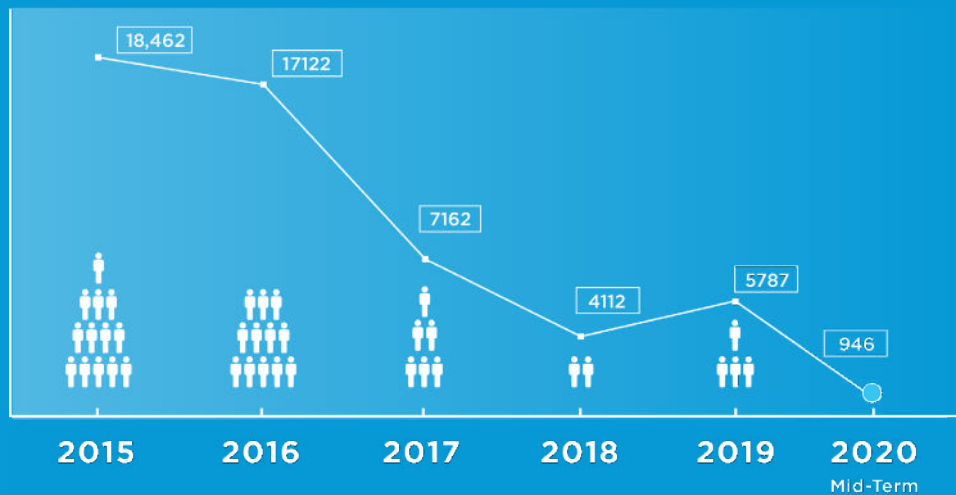
While refugees of various religious traditions have been harmed by the sharp reduction in U.S. refugee resettlement, among those most disadvantaged have been Christian refugees from the countries where Christians face the most severe persecution in the world. In 2019, the number of Christians resettled from the top 50 countries perpetuating Christian persecution on the Open Doors 2020 World Watch List was down 69 percent from 2015. Midway through calendar year 2020, fewer than 950 Christians have been resettled from these 50 countries, down from more than 18,000 in 2015. If the rate of resettlement continues, the U.S. will receive roughly 90 percent fewer Christian refugees from these countries this year than in 2015.

From several particular countries from which the U.S. has historically welcomed large numbers of Christian refugees, including Iran, Iraq and Myanmar (also known as Burma), the decline from 2015 to 2020 is on track to be even greater: 97 percent, 95 percent and 94 percent, respectively.

The tragic reality is that many areas of the world simply aren't safe for Christians, and Christians fleeing persecution need a safe haven in the United States. With religious persecution of Christians at some of the highest levels ever reported, closing the door to refugees and asylum seekers threatens the lives of Christians – and American Christians must not remain silent.

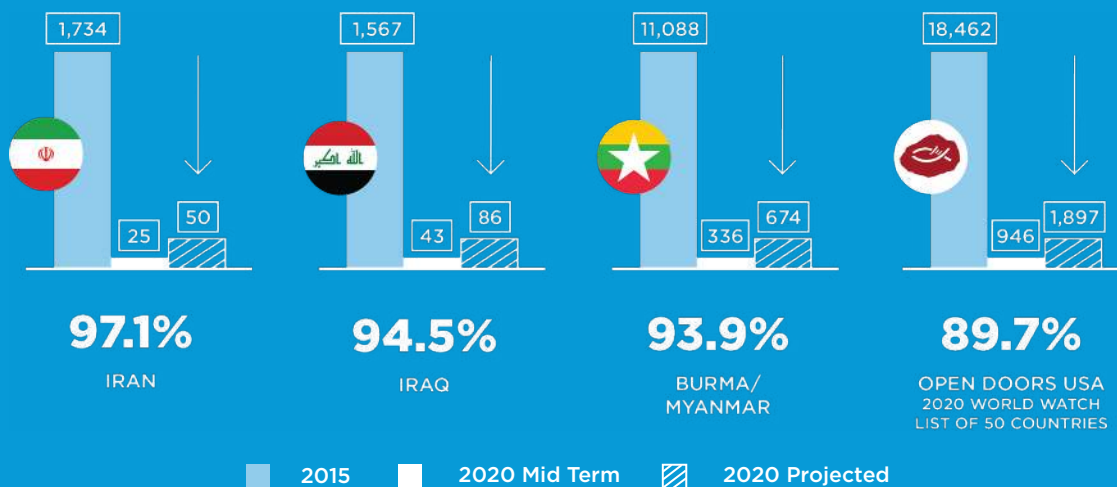
# Persecuted Christian Refugees on the Decline

Arrival of Christian Refugees from the 50 Countries on the Open Doors USA 2020 World Watch List



From the 50 Countries on the Open Doors USA 2020 World Watch List

Projected Decline of Christian Refugee Arrivals, 2015 to 2020



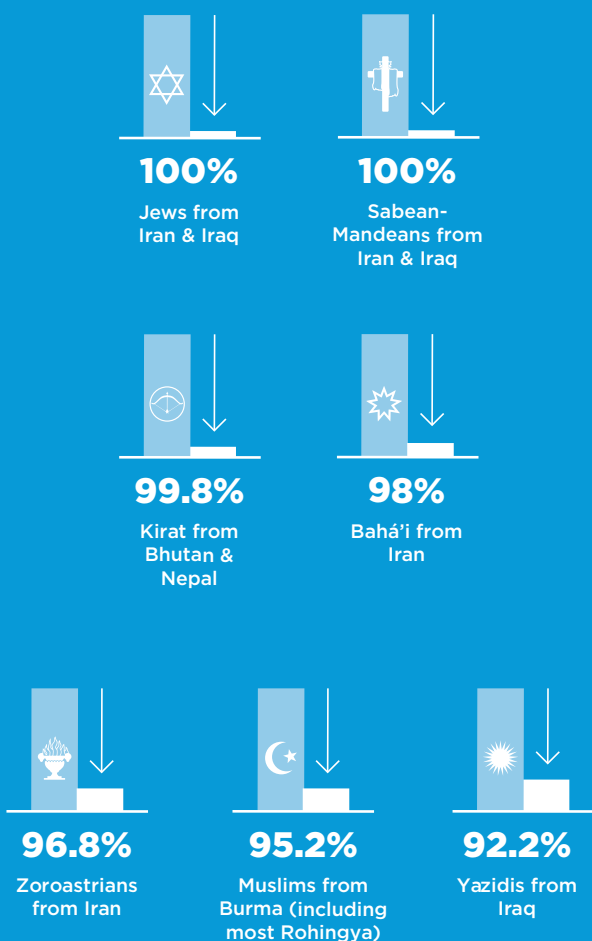
All data is reported from the U.S. State Department's Refugee Processing Center ([www.wrapsnet.org](http://www.wrapsnet.org)) as of July 1, 2020. Religious affiliation is self-reported and various Christian denominations have been aggregated. Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious groups that self-identify as Christians are included in that category, even though some Christians would classify them as a distinct religious tradition. Years reported are calendar years lasting from January 1 through December 31, not the federal fiscal year beginning October 1. Projected figures for 2020 are calculated by taking the number of arrivals during the first 182 days of 2020 and projecting through the full year at the same rate of arrival.



## Resettlement of Other Persecuted Religious Minority Refugees

While this report focuses primarily on the effects of changes to U.S. refugee and asylum policy on persecuted Christians, various other persecuted religious minority groups have also been largely shut out of refugee resettlement in recent years. As Christians, we believe that all people have the right to religious freedom, and that religious minorities of any sort – not just those who share our Christian faith – should be protected.

Based on the number of refugees admitted through the first half of 2020, we project that full year 2020 arrivals from countries where refugees have been persecuted as religious minorities will have declined by the following percentages, compared to 2015:



## The U.S. Asylum Process

Whereas refugees who are resettled to the U.S. are identified and screened abroad – and subject to the annual ceiling on refugee resettlement set by the president – the Refugee Act of 1980 also formalized the process by which an individual who reaches the U.S. can request asylum. An asylum seeker is someone who professes to meet the definition of a refugee – having fled his or her country of origin because of a well-founded fear of persecution on account of their race, religion, political opinion, national origin or membership in a particular social group – but whose claim has not yet been verified by an appropriate governmental authority. Because asylum seekers haven't been given an official status yet, they are often vulnerable to hardship, exploitation and injustice as they wait to be recognized by a host country.

Under U.S. law, there is no limit on the number of individuals who can receive asylum in a given year. The U.S. has committed itself, both in the Refugee Act and as a party to an international convention, not to return someone who can establish that they qualify for asylum to a situation of potential danger. However, because one must physically reach the U.S. – whether on an airplane, a ship or by reaching a land border – asylum is generally accessible only to those who are geographically proximate to the U.S. or who are among the relatively few who qualify for a tourist or other non-immigrant visa, which is generally necessary to board an airplane.

An individual in the United States may request asylum either “affirmatively,” submitting a request to the Department of Homeland Security if they are already present lawfully in the U.S. on a temporary visa, or “defensively,” when facing a removal hearing before an immigration judge. In [FY 2018](#), close to 39,000 individuals were granted asylum either by the Department of Homeland Security or by an immigration judge, an increase of nearly 90 percent just since FY 2016.

Asylum cases can be difficult to win, even when the asylum seeker has legitimately fled persecution, because the burden of proof in an asylum case is on the asylum seeker, and often they lack documentary evidence of what they claim to have experienced. While an asylum seeker has the right to an attorney at their own expense, they are not provided with an attorney by the immigration court, and those without representation – who are generally seeking to navigate a complex law in a foreign language – [are roughly five times less likely](#) to be granted asylum than those represented by counsel.



Photo: Douglas Sadit Oviedo

## Meet Douglas

### Honduras

As a teenager, Douglas Sadit Oviedo had lost both of his parents to AIDS and his older brother to violence. But he found hope and purpose in a relationship with Jesus. He eventually became a youth pastor, wanting to use his faith to help the youth in Honduras.

As he saw too many of the young people he pastored killed by gang violence, he began to speak out. The gangs started to threaten his life, upset by the youth pastor who very effectively drew young people out of their gangs and to Jesus. Ultimately, Pastor Douglas made the difficult decision to flee his country, traveling through Guatemala and Mexico to lawfully request asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border.

After eleven months of waiting in Mexico, a U.S. immigration judge approved his request for asylum in September 2019. As of this writing, he is safe and authorized to live and work lawfully in the U.S. But if new asylum regulations currently under consideration had been in effect, Douglas would have been ineligible for asylum, on account of having transited through more than one country on his journey to the United States.

*“Although it was a difficult process, I’m thankful to the U.S. judge who considered the facts of my case and approved my request for asylum,” says Douglas. “I pray that the United States will continue offering protections to others who have been threatened with death on account of the practice of their faith in Jesus.”*



Photo: Kevin Kubota and Marianne Bach

While data on the religious demographics of asylum seekers or on the particular legal ground(s) of persecution on which asylum requests were based are not readily available, asylum has certainly been an important tool for persecuted Christians able to escape their countries of origin and reach the United States. During the first half of FY 2020, 18 of the top 30 countries of nationality for [those granted asylum by an immigration judge](#) were countries on the Open Doors 2020 World Watch List.

However, in the past few years a series of new policies reinterpreting how U.S. asylum law is to be applied have made it much more difficult for individuals seeking asylum to access due process and, thus, to be granted asylum. For example, a policy known as the “Migrant Protection Protocols” requires most asylum seekers who arrive at the U.S.-Mexico border to remain in Mexico – in dangerous conditions with very limited access to U.S.-based legal representatives – while they await their asylum hearings.

# Meet Mary

## Eritrea and Sudan

At 24, Mary\* made the difficult decision to leave her home country of Eritrea. Her father – conscripted into the Eritrean military like all Eritrean citizens – had died in the line of combat, and Mary concluded her only way to provide for her family was to migrate to neighboring Sudan in search of work.

In Sudan, Mary found work she enjoyed, but in time she also found a target on her back because of her Christian faith. Returning to Eritrea was not a safe option. As the threats against her increased, she embarked upon a trip that ultimately lasted six months and required passing through eleven different countries, flying to South America and traveling north toward the U.S. “I just wanted to be somewhere safe,” Mary says. After a harrowing journey, she finally reached the U.S. border to request asylum.

From there, as is the case for many asylum seekers, Mary was held in a detention facility while awaiting her asylum hearing. But after five months in detention, with the help of a pro bono attorney, Mary received the good news from an immigration judge on a video screen: her request for asylum had been granted. At last, she was free. “God is still with me,” Mary reflects. “He is working on me. Wherever I go, he is protecting me.”

*\* Some names have been changed to protect the safety of individuals who may still actively be at risk of persecution for their faith.*

The COVID-19 crisis has further endangered asylum seekers. In [March 2020](#), the Department of Homeland Security largely closed the U.S.-Mexico border, citing the need to mitigate the dangers of COVID-19; the border closure was subsequently extended indefinitely. As a result, even asylum seekers in the most dire situations, with credible fear of persecution if returned to their country of origin, are currently not allowed to cross the border to request asylum.

Most troublingly, in June 2020, the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security proposed [dramatic new changes](#) that would significantly redefine eligibility criteria for asylum, both for those who arrive at a land border and for those who arrive via airplane.

### Among other changes, the proposed asylum regulations would:

- Change the standard for the evidence necessary to request a hearing before an immigration judge, such that those who have not yet fully gathered evidence of the credibility of their fear of persecution could be deported before they have the time to assemble evidence.
- Significantly redefine key terms contained within longstanding U.S. law, including “persecution,” “well-founded fear,” “torture,” “political opinion” and “particular social group,” to dramatically reduce the number of individuals who could be found eligible for asylum.
- Severely restrict the opportunity to be granted asylum for any individual who transited through other countries en route to the U.S.

While this proposed rule could still be changed – it will be finalized sometime after the completion of a 30-day public comment period that ends on July 15, 2020 – if enacted it would dramatically reduce the number of persecuted Christians and others who would meet the eligibility guidelines for receiving asylum. Responding to these proposed changes, National Association of Evangelicals Vice President of Government Relations Galen Carey [commented](#), “Under cover of COVID-19 the Statue of Liberty is being pulled apart, limb by limb... our proud tradition as a beacon of hope for those fleeing persecution is at grave risk.”



Photo: Motortion

## Take Action

We believe that Christians in the U.S. have an important role to play in standing with persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ, and with others who face persecution, both in prayer and in advocacy.

### We encourage you to pray:

- For persecuted Christians throughout the world, that they would be protected from danger, allowed to practice their faith freely and would persevere despite hardship.
- For persecuted and displaced people of any faith, that their dignity and value would be affirmed by all.
- For the global Church, that we would stand in solidarity with those who are persecuted so we can be a credible witness standing with the vulnerable.
- For those in positions of authority, both in the U.S. and in other countries, that they would pursue justice and respect the religious freedom and other human rights of all.

### We encourage the U.S. government, and for you to advocate with your elected officials:

- To consistently prioritize the advancement of international religious freedom, and that the U.S. government would leverage diplomatic pressure to urge all countries to reduce religious persecution.
- To restore the U.S. Refugee Resettlement program to at least a historically normal ceiling for refugee resettlement, such as 95,000 refugees per year as [recommended](#) by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and to ensure that those persecuted for their faith continue to have access to the program alongside those persecuted for other reasons.
- To reject changes to asylum processing that would reduce access to due process and present new barriers to those with credible fears of persecution from accessing protection in the United States.

We also encourage you to share your public comments regarding troubling new asylum regulations with the U.S. Departments of Homeland Security and Justice using the public comment form at [bit.ly/AsylumPublicComments](https://bit.ly/AsylumPublicComments) no later than July 15, 2020.

# About World Relief and Open Doors USA

World Relief is a global Christian humanitarian organization that brings sustainable solutions to the world's greatest problems – disasters, extreme poverty, violence, oppression, and mass displacement. We partner with local churches and community leaders in the U.S. and abroad to bring hope, healing and transformation to the most vulnerable. Founded in 1944 in response to a situation of mass displacement in Europe, World Relief has worked in more than 100 countries, including partnering with the U.S. State Department and with thousands of local churches to resettle approximately 300,000 refugees to the United States since 1979.

Learn more at [www.worldrelief.org](http://www.worldrelief.org).

For more than 60 years, Open Doors USA has worked in the world's most oppressive and restrictive countries for Christians. Open Doors works to equip and encourage Christians living in dangerous circumstances with the threat of persecution and equips the Western church to advocate for the persecuted. Christians are one of the most persecuted religious groups in the world and are oppressed in at least 60 countries.

For more information, visit [OpenDoorsUSA.org](http://OpenDoorsUSA.org).

Photo: Goran Safarek

