

# The Violent Incidents Database of the International Institute for Religious Freedom

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## 1. History and vision

In 2011, Thomas Schirrmacher wrote an opinion article on the challenges of counting the number of Christian martyrs in which he concluded, “What we need is a database in which for any year we could enter all the known, larger cases [of religious persecution].” This was the direct inspiration for the development of the Violent Incidents Database (VID), which collects, records and analyzes violent incidents concerning violations of religious freedom of all faiths, as input for both research and policy-influencing efforts. The VID is publicly accessible online at [www.violentincidents.com](http://www.violentincidents.com).

The VID was initially developed in September 2011 to support the information management needs of the World Watch List of Open Doors International. This project was discontinued a few years later because the organization moved to a different data collection system that is useful for its purposes but has the disadvantage of not being public. In January 2018, the VID was integrated within the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (OLIRE, in Spanish), with a regional focus. Now, the VID is becoming a flagship project of the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF), with a global focus. Plans are being made to expand it to other regions, starting with Nigeria and India, and hopefully with more to follow.

At present, the VID is the only comprehensive data collection effort that systematically tracks religious freedom violations in its multiple dimensions: individual and collective, physical and non-physical violence, state and non-state actors, religious and non-religious motivations, and in all spheres of life. The VID collects data concerning all faiths. In many incidents, Christians may be victims, but in others, they are actually the perpetrators.

Sadly, the overwhelming number of organizations working in the field of religious freedom do little to collect solid data. They are generally very good at talking about issues, raising awareness in the media and through social networks, diagnosing social situation, and making recommendations for public policy, but very few of

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them engage in the tedious, time-intensive, and sometimes dangerous task of documenting incidents. Nevertheless, effective political advocacy depends on objective, up-to-date, and reliable information, which often means documenting incidents of human rights violations (Petri 2019).

Limited access to information is common in persecution contexts (Glasius et al. 2018). However, documented incidents are the main justification for requesting attention to a specific social problem. Objectively establishing the quantitative impact of an issue makes it a “social fact” that can be considered (Durkheim 1893). If it is not documented, it is as if it did not exist.

Documentation is particularly important in situations where victims of violence are afraid to report crimes to the police, or when states fail to comply with their duty to register human rights violations. To cite just one example, according to estimates by Ethos (2017), a Mexican think tank, 94% of all crimes in Mexico are not reported. In its report *The Human Rights Situation in Mexico*, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) found that “the internal forced displacement has not been documented and analyzed comprehensively by the [Mexican] State, which is the main obstacle facing the comprehensive response that Mexico should give this phenomenon.” The report also observed that the situation “is evidenced by the invisibility of the problem,” which hinders efforts to “adopt the measures necessary to provide an effective response to this phenomenon” (IACHR 2015:134). Therefore, one of the most important purposes of documenting incidents, particularly when they concern human rights violations – including religious freedom – is to ensure that a record of specific violations is kept, so as to hold the responsible party accountable and demand compensation for victims.

The VID raises the visibility of religious freedom violations. This visibility is instrumental in the quantification of incidents and the establishment of patterns of persecution for case-by-case and contextual analyses (FLACSO-Mexico and International Bar Association’s Human Rights Institute, 2017), for the elaboration of recommendations for legal and policy reform, and more generally to inform national and international decision makers, religious communities and civil society organizations.

## 2. Methodology

Religious freedom is a broad and multidimensional concept that can be observed and measured in many different ways. The VID distinguishes between two types of religious freedom violations: physical violence, such as torture or rape as a result of one’s identification with a particular religion, and non-physical violence, which could take the form of discriminatory legislation, social pressure, cultural marginalization, government discrimination, hindrances to conversion, hindrances to participation in public affairs, restrictions on religious life or, more generally, any

form of symbolic or structural violence to borrow sociological concepts popularized by Pierre Bourdieu and Johan Galtung.

Data collection for the VID is an ongoing responsibility of IIRF partners. The main input for the VID is public sources, most of which are digital media available on the internet. These data are complemented by field interviews, desk research and reports provided by partner organizations. Through an online form, individuals can also submit incident reports.

The VID cannot claim to be an exhaustive listing. Many incidents are never made public and are hence not included. On some occasions, media reports of incidents are incorrect. We do not have the capacity to verify all incidents listed. However, where reports are flagged as false or incorrect, the corresponding entries are altered or deleted.

Incident records include geographic location (country, state or province, and city), date of incident, summary, nature of incident (physical<sup>2</sup> or non-physical<sup>3</sup> violence), responsible actor (name and category),<sup>4</sup> religion of victim(s),<sup>5</sup> additional information (when applicable) and web sources (if available). A detailed manual for users of and contributors to the VID, including working definitions, will be available on the IIRF website.

### 3. Examples of data generated by the VID

To illustrate the type of data that is collected by the VID, we now present a few tables describing violent incidents related to religious freedom violations in Latin American countries.

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<sup>2</sup> Physical violence is categorized in the following ways: killings; (attempts) to destroy, vandalize or desecrate places of worship or religious buildings; closed places of worship or religious buildings; arrests/detentions; sentences; abductions; sexual assaults/harassment; forced marriages; other forms of attack (physical or mental abuse); attacked houses/property of faith adherents; attacked shops, businesses, or institutions of faith adherents; forced to leave home; forced to leave country.

<sup>3</sup> Non-physical violence is recorded in the personal, social, and public spheres.

<sup>4</sup> Responsible actors include state and non-state actors: government officials at any level from local to national; ethnic group leaders; religious leaders at any level from local to national; violent religious groups; ideological pressure groups; normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs; extended family; political parties at any level from local to national; revolutionary or paramilitary groups; organized crime cartels or networks; and multilateral organizations and embassies.

<sup>5</sup> Religions include Christian (not specified); Christian (Catholic); Christian (Protestant); Christian (Orthodox); Muslim; Hindu; Agnostic; Buddhist; Ethnoreligious (Indigenous, Afro-Brazilian, etc.); Atheist; Jewish; and Unknown.

Country	Incident Date	Summary	Responsible Actor Category	Religion of Victim(s)
<b>Regulation of religion by organized crime</b>				
Mexico	July 2021	Pedro Pérez López, a catechist of a parish and member of the Organización Sociedad Civil Las Abejas de Acteal, a group created to demand justice in that region after the massacre of 45 indigenous people in the church of the Acteal community in 1997, was assassinated by a shot in the head when he was accompanied by his son to do some shopping in the market. The priest Marcelo Pérez pointed out that the attack is a consequence of injustice, drug trafficking, and organized crime that exist in the area.	Criminal groups	Christian (Catholic)
Colombia	July 2021	According to the Police, ELN subversives in the municipality of Hacarí attacked the church, the priest's house and the parish priest's vehicle. Andrey Fajardo, parish priest of the San Miguel Arcángel church, was unharmed from the terrorist action registered against his parish, although his vehicle was destroyed due to the damage to its doors and windows in the face of the strong explosive wave.	National Liberation Army	Christian (Catholic)
<b>Hostility towards religious conversion in indigenous communities</b>				
Mexico	June 2021	Local authorities and members of the municipality of Mititún, in San Cristóbal de las Casas (Chiapas, Mexico), demolished and burned five houses owned by evangelical indigenous people. The houses belonged to pastor Alejandro Jiménez and his children who, since January 2021, lived outside the municipality, expelled for professing the evangelical religion, in a shelter house of Alas de Águila in San Cristóbal de las Casas. Pastor Alejandro and his family were briefly detained when he returned to visit his sick mother. In reaction to his return, they burned his property.	Ethnic local authorities	Christian (Protestant)
Chile	November 2020	An evangelical church was set on fire and burned down in Victoria by radical Mapuche groups, who protested violently to demand the return of ancestral lands.	Ethnic groups	Christian (Protestant)
<b>Hostility to religious expressions by state and non-state actors</b>				
Argentina	March 2021	Within the framework of International Women's Day, a group of radical feminists caused destruction and vandalism in the local San Luis Rey cathedral, an evangelical temple of the Universal Church and a recognized sanatorium known for being an institutional objector to the abortion law.	Radical feminist groups	Christian (Catholic)
Cuba	March 2021	Numerous stones hit the roof of the pastoral house and the Missionary Church in Cuba, headed by Yoel Demetrio, a well-known detractor of the Cuban socialist regime. "The stones are thrown from neighboring courtyards against the church," explained the religious leader, who belongs to the Apostolic Movement, a network of evangelical churches that the state refuses to legalize.	Intolerant citizens	Christian (Protestant)
<b>Religious restrictions from totalitarian government control and from anti-religion political ideology (communism)</b>				
Cuba	July 2021	In the midst of the peaceful protests and the violent repression by the government of Cuba that took place on July 11, Father Castor Álvarez was beaten and detained when defending some young protesters. The religious remained detained, accused of public disorder, but was released after efforts made by Msgr. Willy Pino, Archbishop of Camagüey.	Government officials	Christian (Catholic)
Nicaragua	July 2020	A person threw a Molotov cocktail at the Chapel of the Blood of Christ in the Cathedral of Managua, causing a fire inside the temple. The Archdiocese of Managua pointed out that this event represented one of the many acts that reflect hatred of the Catholic Church and its evangelizing work.	FSLN party sympathizers	Christian (Catholic)

**Figure 1.** Examples of religious freedom violations in Latin America (physical violence)

Country	Incident Date	Summary	Responsible Actor Category	Religion of Victim(s)
<b>Hostility to religious expressions by state and non-state actors</b>				
Mexico	November 2021	The Electoral Tribunal of the Judiciary of the Federation issued a sentence condemning two cardinals, a bishop and two priests for apparently violating electoral law by failing to observe the principle of separation of church and state during the elections of June 2021. The ministers of worship requested at the time that parishioners meditate on the vote, ask for "light" and not vote for those who promote abortion, among other issues with which they do not agree based on their Christian principles. The ruling orders the Ministry of the Interior to impose the sanctions.	Government authorities (Judiciary)	Christian (Catholic)
Colombia	May 2021	The Constitutional Court pointed out that the publication of the Vice President, entrusting the country to the Virgin of Fatima, was an action that disregarded the principle of secularism and the rights to religious freedom and freedom of conscience, since it was an official message through which the state, through one of the highest representatives of the national government, promoted and identified with the Catholic religion, in violation of the mandate to maintain strict neutrality in religious matters.	Government authorities	Christian (Catholic)
Colombia	October 2020	Judge Ramiro Eliseo Flores Torres refused to marry two women because, according to the judge's testimony, doing so would go against his Christian morals and his convictions. The LGBTI community considered the judge's attitude offensive and discriminatory. The judge is currently under criminal and disciplinary proceedings.	Government authorities and ideological pressure groups	Christian (Protestant)
Mexico	July 2020	Elsa Méndez, Local Representative for District 6 of the state of Querétaro in Mexico, suffers political and judicial persecution. She has 15 investigation folders at the State Attorney's Office where she is accused of the crime of "discrimination" based on her speeches and initiatives that defend life and the family, drawing on her Christian views.	Government authorities	Christian (Catholic)
Argentina	July 2020	The National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism filed a lawsuit with the Public Ministry of the City of Buenos Aires to investigate the authorities of the Santo Tomás de Aquino Group Fraternity (FASTA). The complaint seeks to investigate the contents of this educational network since, according to the authorities, the teachings and beliefs of the group have homophobic and hateful connotations against sexual minorities and the feminist movement.	Government authorities (National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism)	Christian (Catholic)

**Figure 2a.** Examples of religious freedom violations in Latin America (non-physical violence)

Country	Incident Date	Summary	Responsible Actor Category	Religion of Victim(s)
<b>Religious restrictions from totalitarian government control and from anti-religion political ideology (communism)</b>				
Nicaragua	August 2021	Sandinista congressman Wilfredo Navarro threatened to accuse the Catholic Church in Nicaragua of electoral crimes in response to the communiqué issued this Tuesday by the Justice and Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of Managua, which contended that "Nicaraguans are not allowed to vote" and that "there are no conditions for elections." "As political leaders, as political sotanudos [rebels] dared to say not to vote on November 7, we should analyze whether it does not have criminal connotations because you can say I will not vote, but telling people that is an electoral crime, telling people not to vote, they are opting for war and violence," said deputy Navarro.	Government officials (Sandinista Deputy)	Christian (Catholic)
Cuba	June 2021	The Association of Free Yorubas of Cuba filed a complaint before the People's Court and the Municipal Prosecutor's Office of Placetás, Villa Clara, for violations of religious freedom committed by government officials. "We devotees have no freedom of assembly, we have no freedom to carry out our activities and our ceremonies. We have been forbidden to meet to replicate that knowledge we possess and to reflect on the experience acquired over time," said the president of the independent organization, Donaida Pérez Paseiro.	Government officials	Ethnoreligionist (incl. Indigenous, Afro-Brazilian, etc.)
Cuba	March 2021	María Antonieta Colunga Olivera, the wife of Christian journalist Yoe Suarez, was summoned by state security agents. During the interrogation, the officers asked her if she collaborated with independent media and inquired regarding her employment as a communicator at Cáritas. In the same way, they pointed out to her that her husband's work could affect her employment at Cáritas.	Government officials	Christian (Protestant)
Honduras	November 2020	The Agape Christian Church recently denounced the fact that the managers of a shelter did not allow them to distribute donations directly to the victims of Hurricane Eta; on the contrary, they demanded that the institution be placed in charge of distribution. Apparently, in the face of the presidential elections to be held in November 2021, humanitarian assistance is becoming politicized since support is usually directed to municipalities of the government's political party.	Government officials	Christian (Protestant)

**Figure 2b.** Examples of religious freedom violations in Latin America (non-physical violence)

Country	Killings	(Attempts) to destroy, vandalize or desecrate places of worship or religious buildings	Closed places of worship or religious buildings	Arrests detentions	Sentences	Abductions	Sexual assaults/harassment
Argentina	3	38	1	0	1	0	0
Bolivia	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Brazil	3	11	0	0	0	0	0
Chile	0	19	0	0	0	0	0
Colombia	16	44	18	48	8	6	14
Costa Rica	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Cuba	0	11	1	52	3	0	0
El Salvador	6	7	0	0	0	4	0
Guatemala	3	1	0	0	0	0	0
Haiti	1	0	0	0	0	18	0
Honduras	17	6	0	0	0	1	44
Mexico	13	84	0	50	1	13	11
Nicaragua	1	47	2	0	0	1	0
Paraguay	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Peru	2	4	0	0	0	0	0
Venezuela	4	34	2	6	0	1	0
Country	Other forms of attack (physical or mental abuse)	Attacked houses/ property of faith adherents	Attacked shops, businesses or institutions of faith adherents	Forced to leave Home	Forced to leave Country		
Argentina	10	1	1	0	0		
Bolivia	1	1	0	0	0		
Brazil	6	1	0	0	0		
Chile	11	0	0	0	0		
Colombia	504	7	3	605	2		
Costa Rica	0	0	0	0	0		
Cuba	31	3	1	0	0		
El Salvador	14	8	10	9	17		
Guatemala	3	0	0	0	0		
Haiti	0	0	0	0	0		
Honduras	38	0	0	9	0		
Mexico	72	88	1	404	40		
Nicaragua	14	2	1	4	7		
Paraguay	0	0	0	0	0		
Peru	0	0	0	0	0		
Venezuela	10	6	0	0	6		

**Figure 3.** Count of incidents of physical violence in Latin America related to religious freedom (January 2020 - September 2021)

#### 4. Examples of the use of VID data

VID data collected for Latin America have been used in the following ways. First, civil society organizations find the information useful insofar as it helps them to identify scenarios of religious freedom violations not previously considered and that need to be highlighted not only at the local but also at the regional level, especially within human rights protection bodies. Data have been used by NGOs such as Otros Cruces (regional), Fundación Resiliencia Colombia and Conciencia Nacional por la Libertad Religiosa (Mexico).

Second, policymakers or governmental offices including the United States Institute of Peace, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the UK have used VID data. The information helps them recognize new situations that should be addressed in the design or implementation of public policies and laws supporting religious freedom. VID data help these offices gain a more comprehensive view of the state of religious freedom in the region. OLIRE has also used the data to prepare submissions to the IACHR and the UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom.

Third, religious communities and leaders have used the information to strengthen their training programs and to help members of their churches understand the multiplicity of situations to which they may be exposed. Fourth, VID data have been used for asylum determination in several countries, including Belgium, Brazil and the Netherlands. Finally, academics have used the VID as a source of empirical data in their analysis of religious phenomena in Latin American generally or on a specific Latin American country.

As we transform the VID into a global database, we hope that similar results may be achieved for other countries and regions.

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