

**United Nations Human Rights Council
Universal Periodic Review of Burkina Faso**

I. Background

1. **Jubilee Campaign**, in special consultative status with ECOSOC, submits this analysis of religious freedom and human rights in Burkina Faso as a contribution to the Universal Periodic Review.

II. Scope of international obligations and cooperation with international human rights mechanisms and bodies.

2. Burkina Faso has ratified the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; the Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict; the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children child prostitution and child pornography; and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Recommendation(s)

We urge Burkina Faso to:

3. Ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aiming to the abolition of the death penalty; and the Interstate communication procedure under the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

III. Violations of international human rights obligations, considering applicable international humanitarian law

A. Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion

4. Burkina Faso's Constitution of 1991 in Article 1 forbids all forms of discrimination against individuals on the basis of their various identities, including religious affiliation. Article 7 states that "the freedom of belief, of non-belief, of conscience, of religious opinion, [of] philosophy, of exercise of belief, the freedom of assembly, the free practice of custom as well as the freedom of procession and of demonstration, are guaranteed by this

Constitution, under reserve of respect for the law, for public order, for good morals and for the human person.”¹

5. Article 313 of the Penal Code regarding the punishment of crimes against humanity states that the death penalty is stipulated for any individual or entity who makes a “concerted plan tending to the destruction in whole or in part” any national, racial, ethnic, or religious group.²
6. While the Burkinabe government generally does not encroach upon its citizens’ right to freedom of religion or belief, Christians and Muslims remain endangered due to Islamic militancy in the Sahel region. Preceding the 2019 death of Islamic State (IS) leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, a video was released in which he claimed IS responsibility for the April 2019 bombings of three churches and three hotels in Sri Lanka, as well as called upon militants to attack “Crusader France and its allies” as coordinated acts of vengeance for the imprisonment and killings of militants.³ In the month following the video’s release and circulation, suspected militant members of the groups Ansarul Islam, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (J conducted five church attacks in Burkina Faso., which “is particularly troubling given Burkina Faso’s long history of religious tolerance”. The attacked included: a Catholic church near Arbinda (four civilian deaths); a Protestant church in Silgadji (six casualties; a pastor and five Christians); a church in Diabolo which was ambushed during Mass (six casualties, including the priest); a Catholic church in Zimtenga (four deaths); a Catholic church in Toulfé (4 deaths).⁴ In January 2020, the United Nations reported that Burkinabe civilian casualties resulting from terrorist attacks increased from 80 in 2016 to no fewer than 1,800 by year’s end 2019.⁵
7. Listed below are some more recent terrorist attacks attributed to Islamic insurgents upon Christian civilians and their places of worship:
 - a. In February 2020, insurgents attacked the community of Boundore, where they killed 24 civilians – both Christian and Muslim – and injured 18 others before setting fire to the local Protestant church. In the same province and within one week, a retired pastor was killed and an acting pastor was kidnapped.⁶
 - b. In May 2021, suspected Islamic militants attacked an Islamic naming ceremony in Adjarara, killing 15 Muslim participants.⁷

¹ Constitute Project, *Burkina Faso’s Constitution of 1991 with Amendments through 2015*.

² *Loi No. 043/96/ADP du 13 Novembre 1996 portant Code Pénal*, 13 November 1996.

³ Nayera Abdallah Mahmoud & Ali Abdelaty, “Islamic State airs video purporting to be leader al-Baghdadi”, *Reuters*, 29 April 2019. ; Scott Morgan, *Identifying the Drivers of Conflict in the Sahel*, Religious Freedom Institute, 5 June 2020.

⁴ BBC News, “Burkina Faso’s war against militant Islamists”, 30 May 2019.

⁵ United Nations, *Amid Unprecedented Violence, Escalation of Terrorist Attacks in West Africa, United Nations Regional Office Needs Greater Role, Speakers Tell Security Council*, *SC/14069*, 8 January 2020.

⁶ Sam Mednick & Arsene Kabore, “Latest Burkina Faso Church Attack Kills 24, Including Pastor”, *Christianity Today*, 17 February 2020.

⁷ Reuters, “Armed men kill 15 at baptism in northern Burkina Faso”, *Reuters*, 19 May 2021.

- c. In February 2022, Islamic insurgents ambushed a seminary in St. Kisito de Bougui; though there were no civilian deaths, the assailants destroyed much of the building, including dormitories and classrooms.⁸
- d. In April 2022, 83-year-old New Orleans Sister Suellen Tennyson, who had been serving in missionary work in the country for eight years since 2014, was kidnapped by unidentified Islamic militants who left behind her glasses and hypertension medication. Four months later, in August, Bishop Theophile Nare reported that Sister Tennyson had been rescued and was recovering.⁹
- e. In July 2022, Islamic militants attacked 22 Burkinabe citizens – predominantly Christian – which they lined up and executed right in front of a church in Bourasso.¹⁰
- f. In January 2023, jihadist troops killed nine worshippers at a mosque in Goulgountou, including the imam who resisted the assailants’ attack but was subsequently shot in the head.¹¹
- g. In January 2023, Catholic priest Father Jacques Yaro Zerbo, 67, was killed by suspected Islamic militants.¹²
- h. In January 2023, it was reported that an Islamic terrorist attack in Burkina Faso had killed seven foreign Christian missionaries, including a family of four Canadians as well as a single American missionary. In a separate incident on the same day in the nation’s capital, an Australian doctor and his wife were abducted.¹³
- i. In February 2023, presumed Islamic militants killed no fewer than 15 Nigerian Muslim nationals who were traveling through Burkina Faso during their pilgrimage to Senegal.¹⁴
- j. In March 2023, Zambian missionary Brother Simukonde was shot and killed by Burkinabe security forces at a military checkpoint in Ouagadougou. Troops had been stationed in the capital following a rise in terrorist attacks in the city and reportedly believed that Brother Simukonde was a militant. The Burkinabe military subsequently apologized to Brother Simukonde’s family and congregation.¹⁵

⁸ Devin Watkins, [“Attack on minor seminary in Burkina Faso”](#), *Vatican News*, 12 February 2022.

⁹ Jonah McKeown, [“Abducted American Religious Sister Freed in Burkina Faso”](#), *National Catholic Register*, 31 August 2022.

¹⁰ Catholic News Agency, [“At least 22 killed in jihadist attack on village in Burkina Faso”](#), 6 July 2022.

¹¹ Human Rights without Frontiers, [“BURKINA FASO: Nine killed in mosque attack, including the imam”](#), 13 January 2023.

¹² International Christian Concern, [“Catholic Priest Murdered in Burkina Faso”](#), 9 January 2023.

¹³ CBN News, [“Seven Christians Were Killed in Burkina Faso Attack”](#), 15 January 2023.

¹⁴ Reuters, [“Burkina Faso assailants kill at least 15 Nigerian pilgrims travelling to Senegal”](#), 7 February 2023.

¹⁵ Vatican News, [“A Zambian religious of the Missionaries of Africa killed in Burkina Faso”](#), March 2023.

8. It should be noted that while Islamic insurgency in the Sahel region and Burkina Faso specifically has increased remarkably¹⁶ since early 2019, it is absolutely not an unprecedented occurrence. Additionally, Islamist militants do not exclusively target religious figures and infrastructure for attacks, as they wreak havoc upon Burkinabe civilians indiscriminately. One report found that eleven of the thirteen regions of Burkina Faso have been the location of militant activity, with 2022 being the deadliest year on record.¹⁷ In March 2023, jihadist militants killed between twelve and fourteen young adults gathered outside a restaurant.¹⁸ In May 2022, insurgents shot and killed approximately 50 civilians in Madjoari.¹⁹ In June 2021, suspected militants of Islamic State Greater Sahara killed 160 Burkinabes in the nation's deadliest terrorist attack.²⁰
9. In November 2021, Aid to the Church in Need received an anonymous tip from a Christian community in Burkina Faso that detailed that 147 Christians including youth, elderly, and pregnant women have fled from their home communities "as extremists sought to kill them".²¹
10. In March 2023, Burkinabe Christian woman Miriam [pseudonym] shared her story of being kidnapped by Islamic terrorists in Burkina Faso and subsequently escaping. Miriam was abducted following an ambush on her church during Sunday worship, and she recalled witnessing her pastor being tied up and blindfolded and the church's bibles being seized. Along with a small group of Christians and her two young daughters, Miriam was transported to the militant camp where she was soon forcibly married to a male member. As a result of this coerced marriage, Miriam gave birth to one child and soon decided to escape from militant captivity with her infant as well as her two existing children. Miriam and her family executed their escape plan covertly one night and traveled for five days by foot until a passerby offered a safe ride to their home community. Miriam was finally reunited with her original husband who welcomed the return of his wife and two daughters, as well as Miriam's infant child borne from her forced marriage.²²
11. In March 2023, Burkinabe Christian Pastor Touwende explained how he felt there was no way to ensure safety in Burkina Faso as a Christian and therefore felt there was no solution other than to relocate

"At the beginning of the situation, we started hearing [that] bad men were kidnapping people in our villages and were also killing people. It started gradually until they kidnapped our regional church leader. He was kidnapped with seven members of his church. [...] After that, we were hearing news that a pastor has been killed, [that] this Christian has been

¹⁶ UN News, "['Unprecedented terrorist violence' in West Africa, Sahel region](#)", 8 January 2020.

¹⁷ Héni Nsaibia & Caleb Weiss, [Oil on the Jihadi Fire: The Repercussions of a Wagner Group Deployment to Burkina Faso](#), West Point Combating Terrorism Center, January 2023.

¹⁸ France 24, "[Several killed in Burkina Faso by terrorist group](#)", 6 March 2023.

¹⁹ France 24, "[Suspected jihadists kill dozens in eastern Burkina Faso](#)", 26 May 2022.

²⁰ Henry Wilkins, "[More Than 160 Killed in Deadliest Attack of Burkina Faso's War](#)", *Voice of America*, 6 June 2021.

²¹ International Christian Concern, "[Christians Targeted by Jihadists in Burkina Faso](#)", 8 November 2021.

²² Tim Dustin, "[Miriam's Story: 3 years in captivity and still faithful!](#)", *Global Christian Relief*, 13 March 2023.

killed, this other one has been kidnapped.”²³

After Pastor Touwende learned that he was next on the list of targeted church leaders he moved his family a nearby community where after two years he has been able to establish a new church with an ever-expanding membership.

12. Multiple other Christian community leaders have reported the relocation of their congregant base due to insecurity; as of late 2022, approximately two million Burkinabe citizens have been internally displaced due to terrorist attacks and national armed forces’ counter-terrorism efforts, both of which have resulted in civilian casualties.²⁴

a. Father Alain Tougma and his followers, originally living in the Diocese of Fada N’Gourma, were advised to escape by the local bishop as “the terrorists have set their sights particularly on priests and religious sisters”.²⁵

b. Another priest, Father Honoré Quedraogo of the Diocese of Tenkodogo, reports that many other priests and catechists have fled from his diocese in fear of Islamic terrorists who, in addition to coercing residents to follow sharia, attend Islamic schools, and follow Islamic dress code, also restrict churches from ringing their bells and opening for Christian worship. Already, 16 parishes in Father Quedraogo’s diocese have been directly targeted by terrorist attacks and 90% of the diocese’s Christians are “no longer covered by pastoral support”.²⁶ Fortunately, many of Father Quedraogo’s congregation members, including those who remain confined to their homes or who have relocated to nearby communities, are able to listen to Mass services via radio broadcasts.²⁷

IV. Other Human Rights Concerns

13. In mid-January 2023, armed insurgents abducted 27 women and 39 children in villages located near Arbinda who were foraging for fruit. Without providing further details as regards the motive or the conditions they were faced with during captivity, authorities reported that they the group was rescued eight days after the kidnapping.²⁸

14. In April 2023, a viral video spread across social media depicting a group of Burkinabe military troops circling seven teenage boys before killing each child. It is speculated that the perpetrators assumed the boys to be members of the jihadist insurgency as one of the troops in the video said “you don’t have anything to do but to kill people”. Citizens of Burkina Faso have stressed that “they are now more afraid of Burkina Faso’s security forces, who they accuse

²³ Tim Dustin, “‘I was next to be killed’ – a survival story from Burkina Faso”, *Global Christian Relief*, 30 March 2023.

²⁴ Counter Extremism Project, *Burkina Faso: Extremism and Terrorism*, 2023.

²⁵ Aid to the Church in Need, “[Terrorism gains ground in Burkina Faso, targeting priests and religious](#)”, 10 November 2022.

²⁶ Aid to the Church in Need, “[Burkina Faso: Islamic terrorism has become commonplace](#)”, 22 July 2022.

²⁷ Aid to the Church in Need, “[Burkina Faso: ‘Faith, not guns, will save us’](#)”, 29 August 2022.

²⁸ The Guardian, “[Burkina Faso: 66 women and children freed after kidnap by armed assailants](#)”, 21 January 2023.

of extrajudicial killings and the disappearance of untold number of others accused of supporting the militants”. The Burkinabe military has denied culpability for the attack, although analysis of the video identifies the location as an Ouahigouya-adjacent military base and recognize the vehicles which are exclusive to military use.²⁹

15. Due to the increasing frequency and severity of terrorist attacks, at least 6,100 Burkinabe academic facilities have closed as of February 2023; this amounts to the closure of one in four schools (25%) nationwide. Approximately one million Burkinabe children are left without access to education, and “a study conducted by Plan International revealed that girls are 2.5 times more at risk of being driven out of schools than boys in a crisis situation”.³⁰
16. In December 2021, the Burkinabe government published national estimates that upwards of 1.4 million citizens had been internally displaced as a result of terrorist attacks. Also in December, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported following her return from a delegation trip that more than 3.5 million Burkinabe citizens were in desperate need of humanitarian aid.³¹

V. Recommendation(s)

We urge Burkina Faso to:

17. Foster greater collaboration with G5 Sahel nations – Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger – between which transnational Islamist terrorist groups operate with relative impunity. G5 Sahel nations should cooperate to: (1) conduct updated and standard training of military forces with regards to counterterrorism tactics and the necessity of upholding civilian safety and international humanitarian law [laws of armed conflict] while carrying out counterterrorism efforts; (2) periodically research and analyze trends in militants’ transnational movement patterns, cross-border networking, weapons procurement, and insurgent operation strategies in order to develop more robust preventative and preemptive counterterrorism plans; (3) identify and prosecute militant perpetrators of acts of terror; and (4) advance security coverage for vulnerable communities and/or infrastructure.
18. Directly provide humanitarian aid and assistance to communities affected by Islamist insurgency and corresponding counterterrorism efforts; otherwise, ensure that foreign aid is equitable distributed to vulnerable regions.

²⁹ Sam Mednick & Michael Biesecker, “‘We’ll kill you’: Troops film boys’ killings in Burkina Faso”, *ABC News*, 3 April 2023.

³⁰ Norwegian Refugee Council, “Burkina Faso home to almost half of closed schools in Central and West Africa”, 21 March 2023.

³¹ Counter Extremism Project, *Burkina Faso: Extremism and Terrorism*, 2023.