

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, August 02, 2011

Prayer support is crucial to those who suffer for their faith in Jesus. Please use these alerts to prompt your own prayers, and to facilitate prayer in your church and other Christian meetings. Please also send it on to other Christians. This information can also be reproduced in church magazines and news bulletins, provided the source is acknowledged.

July 14, 2011: NIGERIA – Churches on high alert amid rising extremist threat

Christians are fleeing the northern city of Maiduguri amid threats of further, larger-scale attacks by Islamist extremists.

Most churches in the Borno state capital have been boarded up and are under police or military guard as rumours spread that *Boko Haram* militants are planning a ‘massive attack’ at the end of the month. The widely anticipated assault would mark the two-year anniversary of the death in police custody of the extremist group’s founder, Mohammed Yusuf.

Compass Direct news agency reports that church attendance in Maiduguri has fallen dramatically following a series of bomb attacks on churches there. Leaders of the Christian Association of Nigeria have advised churches to suspend or reschedule services. Several have changed service times to try to outwit potential attackers.

Release partner Stefanos Foundation reports a series of bomb attacks in the city on Tuesday, with targets including at least two churches. ‘It is difficult to estimate the number of dead or injured, as people are presently on the run,’ our partner said.

Violence has escalated since attacks began in the run-up to April’s elections. In early June, ten people died in two attacks on St Patrick’s Church. Pastor David Usman and church secretary Hamman Andrew were killed by *Boko Haram* militants on June 7 (*Prayer Alert, June 13, 2011*). Then on June 16, four people died in an attack on a Church of the Brethren congregation in Damboa, 54 miles from Maiduguri, Compass reports. Several other churches have been attacked.

Boko Haram has also been blamed for other recent attacks further afield, including the attack last weekend on the All Christian-Fellowship Mission in Suleja, Niger state, in central Nigeria. Three people died and seven others were seriously injured in the Suleja bombing (*Prayer Alert, July 12, 2011*).

Church leaders fear that unless this extremist threat is tackled, it could deepen the divide between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. ‘This *Boko Haram* has to be dealt with before they plunge the entire nation into a very serious crisis,’ a church leader in Maiduguri told Compass Direct.

For more information about religious persecution in Nigeria, please click here: [Nigeria country profile](#)

(Sources: Compass Direct, Stefanos Foundation)

- Pray that Christians in northern and central Nigeria will focus on God and know that their help comes from the Lord (Psalm 121:1). Ask God to protect churches and Christian homes.
- Pray for wisdom for state and federal governments in Nigeria in tackling this extremist threat. Pray that they will take firm action to end the violence.

July 19, 2011: ARMENIA – Legal threat to Christian activity

Christian groups in Armenia are concerned over a hardening of official attitudes towards non-orthodox church groups as the draft of a new religious law is unveiled.

The proposed new Religion Law – and amendments to other existing legislation – is of greatest concern, particularly sections relating to ‘improper proselytising’ and the compulsory registration of communities with more than 25 adult members. The proposed crime of ‘improper proselytism’ or ‘soul hunting’ would carry a maximum penalty of two years’ imprisonment. Groups refusing to register would face fines of up to 600 times the minimum monthly wage.

Some elements of the Christian community say these proposed changes represent a significant hardening in attitudes towards religious minorities and non-orthodox church groups, and may be used to repress or curb their activities, according to Forum 18 news service.

The drafts of these laws were posted on the Justice Ministry’s website on July 12. The Government says it is currently inviting comment on the drafts.

The proposed laws come against a backdrop of reports of increasing religious intolerance and mounting pressure on non-Orthodox Armenian Christians – from officials, media and the dominant Armenian Apostolic Church. Forum 18 sources suggest that the Armenian Apostolic Church, which it describes as being seen as a ‘socio-political organisation’ with close ties to the Government, has been involved in drafting the restrictive clauses. The media have falsely described some churches as ‘sects’.

A case cited as an example of this harassment is the criminal trial of Pentecostal pastor Vladimir Bagdasaryan from Sevan, a city in Gegharkunik province. He is on trial for ‘obstructing the lawful professional activities of a journalist’ – after he resisted a TV crew’s attempts to enter and film his church without his permission. His defence team’s closing address was scheduled for a hearing on July 13 and a verdict is now awaited.

Pastor Vladimir told Forum 18 that he expects to be convicted and fined. Even though the prosecution has suggested he could be pardoned under a presidential amnesty and not made to pay a fine, the pastor is concerned he would still have a criminal record. His supporters say the case should never have come to trial.

Armenia is still officially 94 per cent Christian. Of this figure, 84 per cent are Orthodox, according to Operation World.

(Sources: Forum 18, Operation World)

- Pray for unity among the church in Armenia. Pray that Christians of all denominations will recognise their nation’s rich Christian heritage and work together to build God’s kingdom.
- Pray that draft religious laws will be amended so that Armenian legislation will uphold religious freedom rather than promote religious intolerance.

July 21, 2011: IRAQ – Fears for missing Christian pastor

Iraqi Christians fear for the safety of a house church leader who has been kidnapped – apparently because he has led Muslims to Christ.

According to Release partners, Pastor Jamal was seized by suspected militants who broke into his house in Dehouk. His family believe he has been targeted because of his work among the Shabak people who speak Arabic and Kurdish.

Religious rights group The Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) Australia reports that one of the people whom Pastor Jamal has led to Christ had his home sprayed with machine-gun fire a few weeks ago.

Some fear that the militants may kill Pastor Jamal immediately rather than demand a ransom for his release. VOM Australia says the group may have links with al-Qaeda.

Despite ongoing threats to Iraqi Christians from militant groups, hundreds turned out recently to celebrate the opening of a new church near Kirkuk in northern Iraq. St Paul's Church in Sikanayan village will serve displaced Christians who have settled in the area after fleeing persecution.

The church was built on land donated by the Iraqi Government, which also reportedly contributed to construction costs.

NEWS UPDATES:

SAUDI ARABIA: Eritrean Christian Eyob Mussie was detained in Saudi Arabia in February and faced a possible death penalty for alleged proselytising (*Prayer Alert, March 24, 2011*). He has now been told he is to be deported to Eritrea. Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports that Eyob, who is in his 30s, has been held in a deportation centre for more than a week while 'arrangements are made for his deportation'. There is a very real danger that Eyob will face ill-treatment if he is returned home.

IRAN: Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, sentenced to death for 'apostasy' (leaving Islam), has learnt that Supreme Court judges found procedural flaws in his original trial and are asking a lower court to re-examine the case (*Prayer Alert, July 1, 2011*). Judges are reported to be trying to verify whether Pastor Yousef from Rasht was indeed once a Muslim. He has been told he will not be executed if he recants his faith.

(Sources: Alarabiya News, AsiaNews, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Deutsche Presse-Agentur, VOM Australia)

- Pray for the safety and swift release of Pastor Jamal. Ask God to be with him and his family, including his young daughter. And pray that God will strengthen and multiply His church in Iraq.
- Thank God that the Saudi authorities have spared Eyob's life – and pray now that he will be deported to a safe third country, not returned to Eritrea.
- Continue to pray that Iranian pastor Yousef Nadarkhani will be granted a full presidential pardon.

July 28, 2011: ERITREA – Mass arrests of Christians continue

Eritrean officials have arrested 90 Christians since May – and more than a quarter of them are college students, according to Release partners.

According to fresh, more detailed reports from Release Eritrea, the authorities detained 64 believers in Adi Abeyto, a village near the capital, Asmara, in May. Only six have since been released – and the rest are thought to be detained at a police station in Asmara or in the notorious Mitire military prison.

Last month, 26 students from Mai-Mefhi College of Technology, south-west of Asmara, were arrested – and, at the time of writing, they were apparently still detained at an unknown location. Release Eritrea sources suggest that some of the students may also have been transferred to Mitire Prison.

Mitire is a remote military prison, located between the town of Nakfa and the coast, where 'torture and extremely harsh treatment are rife', according to Release Eritrea. Of the 12 Christian detainees known to have died in Eritrea since 2002, three were at Mitire.

The precise motives for these latest detentions are unclear. Sources point out that previously college students have been arrested for refusing to take part in Independence Day celebrations. In 2006, a group of students detained for this reason were jailed for up to four years, then expelled from college and drafted into the army, reports Release Eritrea.

Scores of Christians were reportedly arrested in the first few weeks of this year in Asmara and in Nakfa (*Prayer Alert, January 20, 2011*).

In 2002, the Eritrean Government announced it would recognise only four religious communities: the Orthodox Church of Eritrea, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran-affiliated Evangelical Church of Eritrea. About 1,500 Christians are believed to be detained for their faith in Eritrea.

(Sources: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Freeeritrea.com; Release Eritrea)

- Pray for the immediate release of the 90 Christians detained in Eritrea since May – and of all believers imprisoned for their faith.
- Pray for President Isaias Afewerki and his government ministers, who continue to deny categorically that there is any religious persecution in their nation. Pray that they will end the current crackdown on Christians – and bow to international pressure to allow greater religious freedom.