

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, February 10, 2009

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.

PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS NEED YOU!

Release wants to recruit volunteers from around the UK and Ireland to represent the needs of persecuted Christians to their churches. Could you be a Church Rep? Your core role would be to receive and disseminate information, and encourage prayerful support for the ministry within your church. How you develop the role depends on the time you have to give. Church Reps are a vital part of the Release team. Please prayerfully consider if you can join us – and pray that many others will take on this role too. To find out more, ring Gene on 01689 823491.

1. PAKISTAN

Angry mobs have surrounded the courthouse where a Christian human rights activist is on trial for sending a 'blasphemous text' on his mobile.

Hector Aleem, who heads up an organisation called Peace Worldwide promoting social harmony, was arrested at his home in Islamabad last month.

At the first two hearings, large crowds gathered outside the court in Rawalpindi, demanding that Aleem be given the death penalty. He was scheduled to appear in court for a third hearing on February 2.

Some 50 police officers raided Aleem's house at 1.30am on January 22 and took him into custody, following an accusation made against him by Islamist militant group *Tehrik-e-Sunat*. Aleem is alleged to have sent a text on his mobile phone making derogatory comments about Islam's prophet Mohammed – a claim he strongly denies.

Lawyers at the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS), a partner of Release in Lahore, have taken up Aleem's case. His wife Kausur told CLAAS she believes he has been 'framed' because of his involvement in a land dispute between Christians and developers.

Meanwhile, police in Lahore are reportedly investigating a failed plot to bomb a city cathedral on Christmas Day. Militants had planned to detonate a car bomb outside the Sacred Heart Cathedral – but instead it went off by accident three miles outside Lahore, according to ACN News. Six suspects have since been arrested.

The congregation's near-miss has only strengthened their faith, says their pastor Andrew Nisari. 'Our people are very brave,' he told a charity called Aid to the Church in Need. 'As the church is persecuted, people become more conscious of their faith.'

(Sources: ACN News, Assist News Service, Pakistan Christian Post)

- Pray for the release of Hector Aleem: ask God to protect him and his family.
- Thank God that the Lahore cathedral's congregation were unharmed.

2. IRAN

Three Christians were arrested on the same day in Tehran as part of what appears to be a nationwide crackdown on the church.

News agency Compass Direct names three individuals seized from their homes in the Iranian capital on January 21 – but quotes an unnamed source as saying ‘up to 50 people’ have been arrested across the country in recent months.

Hakim Khachikian, an Armenian Christian who attends a house church in Tehran, was arrested first. Half-an-hour later, husband and wife Jamal Ghalishorani and Nadereh Jamali were detained. No details of the charges against them have been released.

There is particular concern for Jamal and Nadereh, both of whom have a Muslim background. The Iranian parliament approved a new penal code imposing the death penalty for ‘apostates’ – people who leave Islam for another religion – last September (7x7, October 14, 2008).

The code has still to be ratified by the Guardian Council, a panel of senior theologians and jurists who can veto any Bill deemed to flout Islamic law or Iran’s constitution. Under the proposed penal code, male ‘apostates’ would be executed; women would be jailed for life.

Compass Direct sources say that the current wave of persecution against Christians – and other non-Muslims including followers of the Baha’i faith – appears to be intensifying.

(Sources: Compass Direct, Mission Network News)

- Pray for all Christians in custody in Iran. Ask God specifically to comfort Jamal and Nadereh’s daughter (13) and Hakim’s two children, aged 11 and 16.
- Pray that Iran’s Guardian Council will rule against the proposed apostasy Bill.

3. INDONESIA

Islamist hardliners in Indonesia have announced a *fatwa* declaring that only a Muslim can be president – much to the alarm of the nation’s Christians.

The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), the nation’s top Islamic body, issued the religious edict in West Sumatra – and immediately drew sharp criticism from Christian leaders.

Sonny Wuisan, leader of the Christian Democratic Party, told the news agency Adnkronos International: ‘This *fatwa* is against the constitution and the MUI should limit itself to discussing religion.’

Indonesia’s constitution recognises five religions, and citizens of any faith are allowed to run for public office. *Fatwas* have no standing in secular law but devout Muslims consider it a sin to ignore them. All candidates running in the presidential elections scheduled for July are Muslim. The MUI also issued *fatwas* banning yoga and smoking.

Religious rights groups have also spoken out against the increasing number of *Sharia*-inspired laws being introduced by local governments in half of all Indonesian provinces. These laws impose strict Islamic codes on both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In Padang, West Sumatra, laws require all women to wear headscarves.

Compass Direct points out that these are likely to become hot issues in the run-up to legislative elections in April and, later, the presidential ballot. President Susilo Bambang

Yudhoyono is widely expected to form a coalition with Islamic parties to win a majority against the Golkar party which is allied with former president Megawati Sukarnoputri.

(Sources: Adnkronos International, BBC, Compass Direct)

- Pray that the MUI will be forced to retract the *fatwa* on presidential candidates.
- Pray that President Yudhoyono will not jeopardise religious freedom in Indonesia by courting Islamist hardliners in the run-up to the presidential election.

4. BURMA

Christians in Rangoon are already being forced to meet in secret – after the authorities banned church meetings in private homes.

As 7x7 reported on January 27, local officials ordered the leaders of 100 churches to stop holding worship and teaching services in private homes – effectively closing most churches in the city.

One youth pastor told Mizzima news agency that congregations were being forced to meet in members' homes in rotation to avoid detection. He spoke of 'at least 100' churches meeting in apartments in Rangoon being affected.

The pastor said many Christians in the city were praying and fasting about the situation. 'We are praying to God that the authorities be blessed and have a change of mind to allow us again to worship normally,' he said.

(Source: Mizzima)

- Pray that this latest repression will cause the church in Burma to grow.
- Stand with Rangoon's Christians and pray officials will have a change of heart.

NEWS UPDATE:

Elderly Christian Shuang Shuying was due to be released from jail two days ago (February 8) after serving two years for allegedly 'damaging state property'. At the time of writing, her husband Hua Zaichen was said to be dying – but the prison authorities had denied his wife permission to visit him in hospital in Beijing (7x7, *January 27, 2009*). Pray for Shuang Shuying, Hua Zaichen and their wider family.

Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on Tuesday, February 24, 2009.

This prayer alert is part of our 7x7 initiative to encourage prayer and action for seven years from 2002 for seven countries where Christians have faced intense persecution: China, Indonesia, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan and Vietnam.

Through our international network of missions, we serve persecuted Christians in 30 countries around the world by supporting pastors and Christian prisoners, and their families; supplying Christian literature and Bibles; and working for justice. Release is a member of the UK organisations Global Connections, the Evangelical Alliance and the Micah Network.

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