

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, March 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. NIGERIA

Hundreds of Christians in Bauchi city in central Nigeria are now homeless and a curfew is in place after a wave of violence swept the state capital.

At least 11 people were killed during a weekend of rioting in Bauchi in which 14 churches, eight vicarages and several Christian homes were destroyed, according to religious rights charity Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW).

Violence broke out on Saturday, February 21, after a mosque was set alight in Bauchi's Railway suburb. Troops were quickly deployed to restore order and a dusk-to-dawn curfew imposed across seven neighbourhoods. But attacks on the Christian community continued, says CSW. At least one person was killed on Monday, February 23.

About 4,500 people were forced to flee their homes and seek refuge at two army barracks in the city, police told news agency BosNewsLife. Release has sent funds to its Nigerian partner, the Stefanos Foundation, to help provide toilet facilities, food, clothes and bedding for 200 of the people worst affected by the riots.

Some sources have linked the Bauchi riots to a local dispute between a church in Railway suburb and Muslims attending a nearby mosque – a row apparently triggered by the Christians' decision not to let Muslims park on church land.

But several reports also link the Bauchi riots to events in Jos in the neighbouring central Nigerian state of Plateau last November. Hundreds of people were killed when intercommunal unrest broke out after local elections; about 300 Muslims were reportedly shot dead by security forces during a night-time curfew (7x7, *December 9, 2008*).

Release sources say the fire at the Railway suburb mosque in Bauchi is now believed to have been started by militants keen to stir up unrest and avenge Muslim deaths in Jos last year. Two churches in Bauchi had been burnt down in the fortnight leading up to the riots.

(Sources: BBC, BosNewsLife, Christian Solidarity Worldwide)

- Pray for a return to peace and calm in Bauchi city after recent rioting.
- Pray for the Stefanos Foundation as it distributes relief and promotes peace.

2. INDIA

Hindu nationalists are planning to bring in controversial 'anti-conversion' laws in one of the Indian states worst hit by recent anti-Christian riots.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government of Karnataka state has announced its intention to follow the lead of seven other Indian states which have approved these laws – much to the dismay of Karnataka's Christian community.

While anti-conversion laws are supposed to prevent forcible or fraudulent conversion, they are widely seen as a way of criminalising religious conversion in general. Similar legislation in states such as Orissa and Gujarat has been misused by Hindu extremists wanting to limit church activities.

The Global Council of Indian Christians reports that pressure on Karnataka's Christians has increased since the BJP came to power. It recorded 112 attacks in 2008. Last September alone, at least 33 churches were targeted and 53 Christians injured.

Christian leaders say state government efforts to bring extremists to justice have been half-hearted. The leader of Hindu extremist organisation *Bajrang Dal* was arrested after publicly admitting his involvement in attacks on Christians – but then released on bail.

Meanwhile, in Orissa state, the epicentre of last year's anti-Christian violence, Christians continue to live in fear. Compass Direct reports the murder of Hrudayananda Nayak, a fathers-of-two found dead in a forest near his village of Rudangia in Kandhamal district last month. He had allegedly received death threats from Hindu nationalists.

(Sources: Compass Direct, The Voice of the Martyrs Canada)

- Pray that the BJP's plans for anti-conversion laws in Karnataka will be thwarted.
- Pray that officials in states such as Orissa and Karnataka will do more to protect the religious rights of the Christian community and to ensure their safety.

3. PAKISTAN

One woman was killed and 17 other people were injured when a gang brandishing guns and wooden clubs attacked Christians in Sangowali village in Punjab.

Mother-of-three Shakeela died after a group of men burst into her home and beat her brutally on March 2. They also attacked several other Christian families – and the congregation of the United Presbyterian church where a service was being held.

Three Christians – including 80-year-old Naziran Bibi, who is Shakeela's mother-in-law – remain in hospital in Gujranwala. It took police 30 minutes to reach casualties as they came under heavy fire from the gunmen.

Investigators from Release partner Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan (SLMP), who have visited Sangowali, say the raid was apparently triggered after a Christian family started legal proceedings against a group of Muslims who, they alleged, had attacked their son.

Lawyers from Release's partner in Lahore, Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS), will press charges on behalf of Shakeela's family.

(Source: Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan)

- Pray for Shakeela's family who are grieving the loss of a mother – and deeply concerned about elderly Naziran who is still recovering in hospital.
- Pray Muslims and Christians in Sangowali can find ways to live in peace.

4. BURMA

The Burmese army is targeting the mostly Christian Chin people with forced labour, arbitrary arrest and even physical assault, according to a major new report.

The report by Human Rights Watch (HRW), entitled *We are like forgotten people*, found that Christians in Chin state in north-west Burma are subject to systematic bullying and violence to try to force them to become Buddhist. Those who flee, to countries such as India, suffer discrimination and abuse abroad too.

The report, based on interviews with ethnic minority Chin in India and Malaysia, documents how Chin Christians in Burma are forced to provide funds and labour to build Buddhist pagodas – and, sometimes, even forced to observe Buddhist rituals. It claims that some Christians have been forcibly conscripted into the army: HRW says some are sent into minefields ahead of the troops. Many have been accused of being insurgents and tortured.

The US State Department reports that Chin state authorities have not granted permission to build a new church since 2003. Some 90 per cent of the Chin population are Christian.

(Sources: Compass Direct, Human Rights Watch, The Voice of the Martyrs USA)

- Ask God to build the faith of Christians in Chin state in Burma.
- Continue to pray for reform in Burma that will bring in greater religious freedom.

ERITREA DAY OF PRAYER: MAY 24

Please join Release in a day of prayer and fasting for Eritrea on Sunday, May 24 – and encourage your church to get involved too. We are asking our supporters to collect signatures for our petition calling on the Eritrean Government to respect the religious rights of its citizens. Also, you could incorporate prayers for Eritrea into your Sunday service – and even consider fasting by, for example, missing a meal. For more information on how you can get involved and to download our petition, visit www.releaseinternational.org/pages/take-action/current-campaign.php

Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on Tuesday, March 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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