

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 18 March 2008

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 International (RI) 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 RI's 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 RI 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. SUDAN

Northern Sudan has again been accused of provoking clashes with southerners to try to delay a decision on the north-south border demarcation.

The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), which governs southern Sudan, claims that the north is backing Arab militias who are engaging southern troops in regular skirmishes in the oil-rich border area.

Up to 70 Arab Misseriya tribesmen were killed in their latest clash with southern troops, this time in Northern Bahr El Ghazal, west of Abyei, says the BBC. Six soldiers also died.

Observers warn that the region is a potential flashpoint for renewed conflict between north and south and that recent violence could undermine the north-south peace deal. The 2005 accord ended decades of civil war which pitted the Arab and Muslim north of Sudan against the south, which is Christian or animist. But a key issue – how Sudan's oil fields should be allocated – remains a stumbling block.

While the SPLM accuses the Misseriya of provoking the conflict, the tribesmen said they were acting in retaliation for an attack by southern troops the previous week.

Elsewhere, efforts to 'build the peace' continue, albeit haltingly. A fresh operation is underway to free southern Sudanese abducted by Arabs from the north during the civil war.

The SPLM has given \$1 million to a Committee for the Eradication of Abduction of Women and Children, which aims to free 1,200 people in its latest initiative, the BBC reports. The committee insists that money is used to pay for food, clothes and shelter for liberated slaves, not to pay ransoms.

Seven people were freed in South Darfur, western Sudan, this month and are waiting in a transit camp in the state capital Nyala before they can be transported home.

- Pray that decision-makers on all sides will work harder to 'build the peace' in Sudan and resolve disputed issues such as the north-south border.
- Thank God for efforts to reunited southern families torn apart by the civil war.

2. CHINA

Officials seized 11 teenagers at an 'illegal' Bible study – as the Chinese authorities made elaborate efforts to prepare religious services for Olympic athletes in Beijing.

The youths, all aged 16 or 17, were detained by the Public Security Bureau (PSB) in Xinjiang after officials stormed a Bible study at a house church in Huocheng county. Two women in the house with them, Fu Jun and Lu Lanxiang, were also arrested.

China Aid reports that the teenagers and women were held for 24 hours for attending an 'illegal religious gathering' – without relatives being allowed to visit them – then released. But three of the youths were later re-arrested and sentenced to 15 days' detention.

Another report from China Aid says that Beijing pastor Cai Zhuohua, who served three years in jail in 2004-2007 for printing Bibles, was held for six hours at a PSB office in the capital's Changping district. He went to the office to register his son's residence card – and was detained for most of the day on 'suspicion of making false documents'.

And all the while, elsewhere in the city, Olympic organisers were busy setting up 'temporary religious venues' for athletes and their entourages, according to China Daily.

Ten imams – and a special menu – are being provided for Muslim competitors, and Catholic priests and nuns are being trained to speak English and French.

China Aid reports that 40 church leaders from the Chinese House Church Alliance arrested in Inner Mongolia on February 20 (7x7, 4 March 2008) were released the following day.

- Ask God to bless and comfort the 11 teenagers arrested in Xinjiang, especially those who were detained twice and held for a fortnight.
- Pray that the presence of foreign believers in China for the Games will bless His church there. Pray that the authorities will be unable to silence the church.

3. PAKISTAN

An RI partner in Lahore narrowly escaped with his life when his car was attacked as he tried to rescue a Christian teenager from the clutches of extremists.

Radicals shattered the windscreen and forced the car off the road – and were only prevented from further violence by the chance arrival of a police car on routine patrol.

Lawyers from CLAAS (Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement) are no strangers to threats of violence in their work defending Pakistan's religious minorities.

On this occasion, CLAAS director Joseph Francis was trying to help 19-year-old woman who had been abducted, raped, forcibly converted to Islam and married to a much older Muslim man. The woman, who was kidnapped on February 3 and held for 16 days, managed to escape from her captor's home and immediately sought CLAAS' help.

Her Muslim 'husband' filed a writ against her family to try to get her back – while CLAAS lawyers formally accused him of rape, abduction and forced conversion.

Francis and colleagues from CLAAS were transporting the woman to a safe house at 3am on 6 March when their attackers struck. They describe their escape as 'miraculous'.

- Praise God for His protection over the CLAAS team and the woman.
- Pray that CLAAS will successfully prosecute the woman's abductor.

4. INDONESIA

Islamist radicals are making life increasingly difficult for churches and Christian organisations across Indonesia, forcing many to close.

The latest reported closure came when about 60 demonstrators surrounded a church in the Riau province of Sumatra island last month and daubed 'Do not build without permit' in red paint on its walls.

The Love Evangelical Bethel Church, which was founded in 1980 and is the only church in Tangkerang Labuai village, is registered with the authorities. But it does not have a 'permit for expansion' – because locals had told its pastor they would have no objections to any building work. The pastor, Rev Alex Ritonga says none of the 14 mosques in the village has any such permit.

'We will be going to court if this case cannot be discussed between the church assembly and the demonstrators,' says Rev Ritonga.

Meanwhile, in Java, a gang of Islamist youths marched on the Indonesia Pentecostal Church Kalibaru in Tangerang, which also houses the church's social ministry Harvest Community Development. The mob forcibly shut both church and ministry, citing legislation introduced in 2006 which makes it harder for small churches to obtain official permits.

Other churches, closed after extremist attacks last year, are keeping their doors firmly shut. Compass Direct cites three churches in Java raided in 2007 which have yet to reopen. In all three instances, their attackers justified their raids by accusing the congregation of not having the necessary permit.

- Pray for the congregations of the five churches whose closure is reported above. Pray they will find alternative places of worship, despite extremist threats.
- Pray that the authorities will review legislation which makes it nearly impossible for small churches to obtain official permits.

Sources: BBC; China Aid; China Daily online; CLAAS; Compass Direct; International Christian Concern; The Voice of the Martyrs Canada.

RI'S NEWS WEBCAST:

Have you seen RI's ground-breaking online news bulletin *World Update on the Persecuted Church* yet? This regular bulletin brings you face-to-face with the overcoming Church with stories, video and pictures. It's an indispensable resource for church services or prayer and home groups. www.releaseinternational.org/pages/downloads/world-update-webcast.php

Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on Tuesday 1 April 2008.

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

Through our international network of missions, RI serves 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. RI is a member of the UK organisations Global Connections, the Evangelical Alliance and the Micah Network.

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