

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, May 19, 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. ERITREA – Three women prisoners freed in run-up to Release day of prayer

Three Christian women have been freed unexpectedly from jail in Eritrea – as Release urges the church to pray for greater religious freedom there.

The women – identified only as Aatifa, Samara and Zula – were detained arbitrarily for six months in a notorious prison camp 150km west of Asmara for belonging to a ‘banned’ Christian group. But, in a surprise move, prison officials released them, on condition that they should ‘stop preaching the gospel and not tell anyone about their stay in the camp’.

The women told the camp leader that, as committed Christians, they could not stop preaching the gospel – but insisted that they were not trying to undermine the regime. The camp leader decided to let them go. The women believe their release was ‘the work of God’. ‘To keep the peace, they let us go, without conditions,’ the women said later.

The women were detained after sharing their Christian faith openly in a mainly Muslim village. All three were raised as Muslims but later became Christians.

Release welcomes the news that these women have been freed – but remains extremely concerned over the appalling religious rights record of Eritrea as a whole. It is calling on Christians worldwide to unite in a day of prayer for Eritrea on Sunday, May 24, and to sign its petition calling on the Eritrean authorities to allow greater religious liberty.

(Sources: BosNewsLife, CNN, Open Doors)

- **Act:** please encourage your church to get involved in Release’s day of prayer for Eritrea on Sunday, May 24. Our 31-day prayer special (included in the current *Prayer Shield* or available from our office) has lots of prayer ideas. Please also email this link www.releaseinternational.org/current to friends who can sign our petition online and download a paper copy to collect signatures at church.
- **Pray:** Pray for the thousands of Eritrean Christians imprisoned for their faith – often in inhumane conditions. Pray that the Eritrean authorities will respond positively to international calls for them to respect citizens’ religious rights.

- **Join us:** Release is supporting a joint protest vigil outside the Eritrean Embassy in London on Thursday, May 28. The aim of the vigil (organised by Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Release Eritrea! and Church in Chains) is to highlight the continuing persecution of Christians in Eritrea. Please come and join us as we stand together in support of our brothers and sisters. Meet at the Eritrean Embassy, White Lion Street (near Angel Tube Station) from 2.45pm. (Vigil lasts from 3pm to 4pm.)

2. VIETNAM – Hmong church threatened with demolition yet again

A group of Christians fled persecution in north-west Vietnam only to have their new church in the Central Highlands demolished – and they may soon face the same trauma again.

Last December, local officials and police destroyed the Cu Hat church in the Central Highlands on the ground that it was ‘illegally constructed’.

The 500-strong congregation, made up of ethnic minority Hmong Christians, had not submitted a planning application before beginning building work as they knew that permission would not be granted. Virtually all buildings in this area of Vietnam are erected without a permit.

After issuing two warnings that the church must be dismantled, officials, police and demolition workers demolished it on December 17. Several members of the congregation who tried to prevent the demolition were injured by police wielding electric cattle prods.

The congregation built a temporary shelter of bamboo and tin on the same site within days – but now officials are reportedly threatening to tear that down too.

(Source: The Voice of the Martyrs Canada)

- Thank God for the determination of these Hmong Christians to worship God, whatever opposition they face.
- Pray for a change of heart in the officials intent on demolishing this church.

3. CHINA – Officials hit back at claims of rising religious intolerance

The Chinese authorities have dismissed as a ‘smear campaign’ claims that their persecution of unregistered church groups intensified last year.

The number of Christians arrested in 2008 may run into thousands, according to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

A spokesman for China’s Foreign Ministry hit back at the report, claiming it was an ‘attempt to smear China’. ‘It is a fact that the Chinese government protects its citizens’ freedom of religious belief according to law, and every ethnic group in any part of China enjoys full religious freedom,’ he told *Xinhua*, a Chinese daily newspaper.

The USCIRF did point out that Chinese citizens in many areas were freer to take part in ‘officially sanctioned religious activity’ – including state-sanctioned churches such as those belonging to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

But the Commission highlighted that unregistered religious groups suffered increased harassment, imprisonment and torture. It noted in particular the targeting of lawyers who had dared to defend Christians in court. One such lawyer – Gao Zhisheng, a Christian

from Beijing – has not been seen since he was arrested in February (*Prayer Alert, April 7, 2009*). He was tortured during a previous spell of detention in 2007.

And the persecution continues. Sixteen Christians are still in custody after being arrested at a house church in Xinye city, Henan province, on April 30. The 16, all members of the China Gospel Fellowship, include ten preachers from Hubei province.

(Sources: ChinaAid, Compass Direct)

- Pray that the Chinese authorities will respond to international scrutiny of their religious rights record by deciding to allow greater religious liberty.
- Continue to pray for Beijing lawyer Gao Zhisheng. Sign Release partner ChinaAid's petition calling for Gao's release at www.FreeGao.com

4. INDONESIA – Bible college still waiting for a home

Bible college staff and students who were driven out of their premises in Jakarta by violent protesters ten months ago are a step closer to finding a new home.

The Indonesian authorities have inspected a site in Bambu Apus district as a potential new campus for the Arastamar School of Theology and have promised to issue a building permit. College staff would, however, still need the approval of local residents before they could begin construction.

Some 1,200 staff and pupils from the college have been living in temporary accommodation since a mob brandishing machetes raided their former campus in Kampung Pulo in July (*Prayer Alert, September 2, 2008*). Some have been living in tents and holding classes in the open air under trees. About 500 have been housed in an abandoned office that lacks even basic facilities such as running water and toilets.

In mid-March, officials promised to buy the original campus from the college – but made clear that they would only pay for the land, not the buildings.

(Source: Compass Direct)

- Thank God that a new campus has been identified for the Bible college.
- Pray that neighbours will not voice any objection to a new college being built there.

PRISONERS OF FAITH MINISTRY:

Our Prisoners of Faith Ministry provides pastoral care and practical support for Christians imprisoned for their faith. An email alert is sent free monthly, highlighting an individual Christian prisoner, giving prayer points and addresses for letter-writing. To receive these alerts, please contact the office or sign up by visiting our website: www.releaseinternational.org/prisonersoffaith

Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on Tuesday, June 2, 2009.

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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