

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 2 August 2005

This is the regular Prayer Alert service of Release International.

Prayer support is crucial to those who suffer for their faith in Jesus. Please use these alerts to inform other Christians as well, and to facilitate prayer in your church and in other Christian meetings. The information can also be reproduced in church magazines and news bulletins, provided the source is acknowledged.

Our next Prayer Alert is due for issue on 16 August 2005.

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1. The Vietnamese authorities destroyed half of Rev Nguyen Hong Quang's church and his home – then harassed worshippers meeting in the wreckage.
2. Christians in Nigeria's troubled Plateau State fear imminent attack from Islamist extremists who have issued death threats.
3. Pakistan's North West Frontier Province has passed a bill which heralds what its critics describe as the 'Talibanisation' of the region.
4. Irregularities in the trial of three Christian women charged with proselytising threaten to make a mockery of court proceedings, observers in Indonesia say.

1. The Vietnamese authorities destroyed half of Rev Nguyen Hong Quang's church and his home – then harassed worshippers meeting in the wreckage.

On July 19 some 70 workers brandishing sledgehammers and electric saws arrived at the Vietnam Mennonite Church, Binh Khanh Ward in District 2 of Ho Chi Minh City. They proceeded to tear part of it down over four hours.

Part of the property had been legally disputed – a 4-metre addition to the main hall which had allegedly been constructed without permission – but the demolition team destroyed a further 4.8 metres of the main meeting hall. They also pulled down the Quang family's apartment, also disputed though the church had petitioned officials about it many times.

Le Thi Phu Dung, the 31-year-old wife of the imprisoned pastor, could only watch, pray and comfort her young children: she could not summon help because her mobile phone had been jammed.

Despite the devastation, 15 Mennonites gathered in the remainder of the building to pray five days later, on July 24. However, they were soon interrupted by the arrival of 30 officials, including police, security forces and a local community leader.

Officers ordered the Christians to stop praying and told Rev Quang's wife Dung to disband the meeting. The police officer leading the raid then cited Dung for 'gathering a crowd and disturbing public order'; she was summoned to appear at a police station the next day 'to resolve the violation', according to Compass Direct.

Two of the congregation were taken away for questioning immediately. One of them was Le Quang Du, father of Le Thi Hong Lien, one of the Mennonite Six who was so badly abused in jail that she suffered a mental breakdown.

At 9pm that same evening, just two hours after the first raid, officers returned to the church, claiming to have had reports of another meeting. Finding no such activity, they threatened to confiscate motorbikes parked inside the building.

Meanwhile, Rev Quang is now being held in the Dac Trung prison camp in distant Dak Lak province where, according to his wife, forced labour is threatening his health. He has suffered occasional blackouts. His fellow Mennonite Pham Ngoc Thach also remains in jail.

Act

- Write a letter of encouragement to the Quang family at: Ba Le Thi Phu Dung; C5/1H Tran Nao, Khu Pho 1; Phuong Binh Khanh, Quan 2; Ho Chi Minh City; Vietnam. Polite letters expressing concern about the treatment of these Mennonites can also be sent to: His Excellency Mr Trinh Duc Du, Vietnamese Head of Mission in London; The Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam; 12-14 Victoria Rd; London W8 5RD.

Pray

- Ask God to sustain and strengthen Rev Quang's church. Pray particularly for Rev Quang's family: his 31-year-old wife, who was elected head of the Vietnam Mennonite Church in June, and their three young children.
- Pray for Rev Quang and evangelist Pham Ngoc Thach, the remaining two of the Mennonite Six still in jail. Pray that God will give them the stamina to endure and to change lives around them through their powerful witness.

2. Christians in Nigeria's troubled Plateau State fear imminent attack from Islamist extremists who have issued death threats.

A group calling itself the Taliban has posted notices in churches, one of which reads: 'What happened in 2001 September is about to happen again... This fight no-one can stop...'

It also says it intends to target the headquarters of the Church of Christ in Nigeria in Jos, claiming: 'Not one Christian will survive.'

A Release International (RI) worker on the ground, who is helping Christian communities recover from previous attacks by extremists, says tensions are running high. 'We are at risk of another attack with every passing day,' he says.

RI's contact has received reports of ammunition being stockpiled on the border between Plateau and Nasarawa states, and of militants practising their shots in the same area.

This appears to be part of a concerted campaign by extremists to drive out Christians from Plateau State and pave the way for Islamic or Sharia law. Twelve of Nigeria's 37 states have adopted Sharia so far.

RI's contact says Islamist groups are also stepping up pressure on the Nigerian government to forge stronger links with Islamic institutions. 'All these are moves to Islamise the country,' he says.

RI workers are currently involved in reroofing homes for scores of families in Plateau whose property was burnt in previous raids by extremists.

- Pray for Christians in Plateau State who are under extreme pressure. Ask God to protect them and grant them wisdom, grace and peace.
- Pray particularly for RI workers who are trying, in difficult circumstances, to help people rebuild their lives after previous persecution. Pray for emotional and spiritual healing for those families being rehoused.

3. Pakistan's North West Frontier Province has passed a bill which heralds what its critics describe as the 'Talibanisation' of the region.

The province's legislature voted in favour of an act which will set up a watchdog with powers to reform society in keeping with 'Islamic values' and enforce these values in public places.

Under the new Hasba Act, a senior Islamic cleric will have responsibility for such matters as ensuring people respect the call to prayer and preventing unrelated men and women from appearing together in public. His remit will also include regulating the media to ensure it promotes Islamic values.

This development in North West Frontier Province (NWFP) has prompted comparisons with the Taliban's Department of Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue in neighbouring Afghanistan.

The Hasba Act came into force after the controversial bill was passed by 68 votes to 34 on July 14, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide. The original bill was introduced by the NWFP's ruling party, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a coalition of hard-line groups said to have links with the Taliban. It has already introduced Sharia law to the province.

The new legislation is strongly opposed by Pakistan's federal government which has filed an appeal with the Karachi bench of the Supreme Court. The governor of NWFP, Khalilur Rehman who was appointed by the federal government, has said he too will fight to prevent the legislation from being implemented.

Shahbaz Bhatti, chairman of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance, said the bill would 'promote religious intolerance, extremism, fanaticism and terrorism, and eradicate religious freedom and basic human rights'.

- Pray for religious minorities in North West Frontier Province, including Christians, who are hard-pressed by an increasingly radicalised regime. Pray that God would give them the grace and strength to face challenges ahead.
- Pray that the new Hasba Act in the province would not be implemented, in the interests of religious tolerance for all.

4. Irregularities in the trial of three Christian women charged with proselytising threaten to make a mockery of court proceedings, observers in Indonesia say.

RI sources report that the judge in the trial of Dr Rebekka Zakaria, Mrs Ratna Bangun and Mrs Eti Pangesti has allegedly been meeting with radical Islamic leaders who brought the case against them.

The three women from the Haurgeulis Christian Church of David's Camp, West Java, were charged after including Muslim children in a picnic outing held as part of a church-run children's programme. The Indonesian Islamic Council of Clerics (MUI) initiated proceedings, claiming the women had tried to convert Muslim children by enticing them with gifts.

As reported in the previous 7x7 (July 19), the trial has attracted large crowds of young extremists who have been intimidating witnesses and defendants with threats of violence. RI sources believe that their aim is also to intimidate the judge into returning a guilty verdict.

Protestors pelted Dr Rebekka's home in Haurgeulis with rocks on July 13. She is being detained at Indramayu prison, with her fellow defendants.

At the July 21 hearing, only one witness for the prosecution was called: Dr Abdul Wahid Syakuri from the Indramayu District Office of the Department of Religion, who is also vice-chairman of the MUI. He claimed that the defendants' activities had violated legislation banning the giving of aid in return for a religious conversion. At the previous hearing, on July 14, both witnesses scheduled to give evidence had failed to appear. Crowds of extremists have continued to disrupt proceedings.

Lawyers for the defence have repeated their assertion that no Muslim children attending the picnic had become Christians.

Outside the courtroom, moderate Muslim leaders have spoken out in favour of the three women. The former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid has asked for the case to be withdrawn. The case continues.

- Pray for the acquittal of the three women on trial in Indramayu, West Java. Pray that moderation and tolerance will prevail. Ask God to protect them from extremist threats.
- Thank God for moderates' willingness to speak out in favour of these three women. Pray that this case will not be exploited to further radicalise parts of Indonesian society.

Sources: Christian Solidarity Worldwide; Compass Direct; Release International; The Voice of the Martyrs Canada; The Voice of the Martyrs Indonesia; Vietnam Mennonite Church General Office.

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

Through our international network of missions, Release International 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.

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