

# RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

*Tuesday 3 January 2006*

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 both in your church and other Christian meetings. This information can also be reproduced in church magazines and news bulletins, provided the source is acknowledged.

## **1. INDONESIA**

A church leader imprisoned for alleged proselytising through her Sunday School is being allowed to hold worship services in jail.

Dr Rebekka Zakaria, who was convicted with her co-defendants Eti Pangesti and Ratna Bangun in September, has been permitted to hold a weekly church service in the prison courtyard – despite the fact that radical Islamists forced her previous church to close a year ago. Compass Direct reports that some 35 members of her church are allowed to attend each Sunday.

Compass also reports that Dr Zakaria had prayed that she would be released from jail by Christmas. However, the three women's appeal was rejected in mid-November.

Their lawyer Posma Rajagukguk is planning to take their appeal to a higher court in the new year. Sources report that there is still hope the women's three-year sentence might be reduced

Zakaria, Pangesti and Bangun were arrested after allowing Muslim children to attend a Christian education programme they were running. These children's parents had given their consent for this – but were too frightened to testify for the defence when Muslim radicals took the case to court under Child Protection legislation in June.

'I never imagined I would be in prison – never,' Zakaria told Compass. 'But I will submit to whatever God wants for me.'

Zakaria's daughter is reportedly allowed to bring food for her mother almost daily – and the women cook on a small gas stove brought in by another visitor, for themselves and for others in their cell block.

Meanwhile, the huge security operation to protect Indonesian churches over Christmas appears to have been successful. There were no reports of violence at the time of writing.

- Pray for Rebekka Zakaria, Eti Pangesti and Ratna Bangun as they come to terms with having spent Christmas away from their friends and families. Thank God that prison guards have allowed Dr Zakaria to continue to minister to her congregation, even in jail.
- Thank God that Christmas celebrations in Indonesia have apparently passed without instances of violence and persecution.

## **2. CHINA**

Twelve house church leaders were arrested during a Christmas Day raid on a church in Xinjiang, in one of a series of raids across the Christmas period.

Eyewitness reports say 200 police officers and officials from the Religious Affairs Bureau swooped on the church in Ma Na Si County where more than 200 Christians had gathered to celebrate. Seven of the 12 detainees were released at midnight on the following day but five remain in custody.

China Aid reports that a similar raid was made on a house church meeting in Korla City in Xinjiang on Christmas Eve. No arrests were made here but the meeting was closed. At least three other raids were made on pastors' homes in Jiangsu province, Henan province and Inner Mongolia.

Elsewhere, nuns and church leaders have been attacked while protesting against the confiscation of church properties in Xian, the capital city of Shaanxi, and Tianjin city in Hebei province.

In both instances, protestors wanted to draw attention to the fact that buildings confiscated by the Chinese government during Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution should by now have been returned to the church. During the second demo, on December 16, a group of 'thugs' used iron bars, bricks and clubs to try to disperse the 48 church leaders and two nuns who were protesting.

Meanwhile, imprisoned church leader Cai Zhuohua has had his hopes of a reprieve dashed after the courts threw out a second appeal. The Chinese authorities announced the unexpected 'second trial', from which the verdict was announced on December 20, after intense international lobbying.

In November Pastor Cai, his wife and brother-in-law were found guilty of 'illegal business practices' for printing Bibles and other Christian literature. Their sentences were three years, two years and 18 months respectively.

- Pray for the speedy recovery all those injured in recent protests against confiscated church property. Pray too for the release of arrested house church leaders in Xinjiang.
- Continue to pray for Pastor Cai, his wife Xiao Yunfei and her brother Xiao Gaowen. All three have reportedly been tortured and repeatedly interrogated since their arrest in 2004.

### 3. PAKISTAN

A man whose son was tortured to death by Muslim seminary students has asked for police protection after receiving death threats from those he accuses of his son's death.

Pervez Masih from Punjab made his appeal for protection to the judge in the trial of Ghulam Rasool who is accused of torturing Masih's son, Javed Anjum, to force him to convert to Islam.

Islamists have been trying to persuade Masih to drop charges since Rasool had his bail revoked recently. On three occasions, clerics armed with pistols have gathered outside the courtroom in Toba Tek Singh, Punjab, to threaten and jostle Masih and his lawyer Khalil Tahir Sindhu.

Rasool had been granted bail in December 2004, at the start of a trial now entering its 21<sup>st</sup> month.

Rasool was a Muslim prayer leader and security guard at the *madrassa* (or Islamic school) where Anjum was kidnapped and tortured in April 2004. In a statement on his death bed, the 19-year-old said he had been seized as he drank from a tap outside the seminary and then tortured for five days to force his conversion.

Representatives of the *madrassa* eventually took Anjum to the police to accuse him of trying to steal a water pump. Police immediately called Pervez Masih to tell him his son needed hospital treatment. Anjum died of his injuries in Faisalabad's Allied Hospital on May 2, 2004.

The next hearing in the case was scheduled for Monday January 2. At the time of writing, the court had taken no action to protect Masih and his lawyer.

President Musharraf has launched a crackdown on *madrassas* after it emerged that one of the London bombers on July 7 had spent time at such a seminary in Pakistan. However, radical Islamist parties such as the Mutahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA) have reacted angrily to attempts to purge *madrassas* of fanatical elements.

- Pray for Pervez Masih and his family, trying to seek justice for their son Javed in very difficult circumstances. Pray that they will be successful in their quest.

- Pray that President Musharraf will stand up to radical politicians and persist in trying to wipe out fanatical elements from Pakistan's religious seminaries.

#### **4. SRI LANKA**

Gunmen in eastern Sri Lanka raided a Christmas Eve service in a cathedral, killing a senior politician and injuring eight others.

Joseph Pararajasingham, a Christian and an MP for the Tamil National Alliance, died in St Ann's Cathedral in Batticaloa shortly after 1am on Christmas Day when two unidentified gunmen opened fire on the congregation. Mr Pararajasingham's wife Sugunam was seriously wounded in the attack.

RI sources say that, though no group has claimed responsibility for the killing, the blame appears to lie with a breakaway faction of the rebel Tamil Tigers (or LTTE - Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam).

Although the MP's murder is thought to be politically motivated, it has left Sri Lanka's hard-pressed Christian community feeling fearful, particularly in the rebel-held north and east of the country.

'Reports from these regions indicate there is mounting tension and uncertainty,' said an RI source. 'Christians in the north and east celebrated Christmas on a very low key.'

This is the third year running that Christmas has been difficult for Sri Lanka's Christians: last year's tsunami struck on Boxing Day while, in December 2003, controversy raged as Christians were accused of murdering a prominent Buddhist monk, Gangodawila Soma Thera, on a visit to Russia.

The RI source fears that a return to war will only help 'fan the flames of religious intolerance'. 'An "anti-terror" façade can be used effectively by anti-Christian elements against churches and Christians, perpetuating the Buddhist extremists' accusation that Christians are aiding and abetting terrorism.'

Mr Pararajasingham was an outspoken critic of the proposed anti-conversion laws which Christians fear would be used to crack down on church activities. Hard-line Buddhists in the National Heritage Party (JHU) have pledged their support for the newly elected president Mahinda Rajapakse.

- Pray for Christians in Sri Lanka at this time of mounting insecurity. Pray that political tensions would not be exploited to persecute them further.
- Pray for the family of the murdered Mr Pararajasingham, especially his wife who has been seriously wounded.

*Sources: BosNewsLife; ChinaAid Association; Compass Direct; TamilNet; The Associated Press; The Voice of the Martyrs Canada.*

#### **Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on Tuesday 17 January 2006.**

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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