

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 5 July 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 19 July 2005.

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1. Fear is growing for the safety of a Vietnamese pastor detained in a mental hospital simply because of his religious beliefs.

Doctors overseeing Pastor Than Van Truong, who has been held in Bien Hoa Mental Hospital in Dong Nai province since September 2004, may be injecting him with life-threatening drugs to cure his 'religious problem', according to Jubilee Campaign USA.

Dr Hoang Trong Tam, interviewed on Radio Free Asia on June 1, said the pastor was 'fanatical', with 'an extreme belief in God' – and therefore in need of medical treatment. His family and supporters insist Pastor Truong is mentally sound.

Pastor Truong, leader of the Baptist General Conference Church in Dong Nai, was put under house arrest in January 2004 and charged with 'propagandising to destroy the Socialist Republic of Vietnam'.

When he appeared before the Public Prosecutor of Dong Nai in September 2004, he was diagnosed as being 'mentally ill and delusional' and committed to mental care. CSW reports that he was injected with drugs inducing lethargy but, when his dosage was reduced, Pastor Truong started writing letters demanding his freedom.

International diplomacy earlier this year put pressure on the Vietnamese hospital authorities to review Pastor Truong's case in May – but his continued zeal only confirmed their diagnosis that he remains 'delusional'. Despite this, one doctor has said to Mrs Truong in private on several occasions that he believes Pastor Truong to be sane.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) now reports that his usual, sympathetic doctor has not been seen since June 10. Another medic has since tried to administer new pills to Pastor Truong and, when the pastor refused to take them, threatened him with compulsory injections.

Pastor Truong, a former communist official, has been imprisoned several times since 1996 for preaching the Gospel to government officials, including the Prime Minister. He was imprisoned without trial in 2003 after sending Bibles to Vietnam's top officials – deemed to be a 'crime against the state'.

Meanwhile, in Washington DC, three Vietnamese house church leaders submitted written testimony to a committee of the House of Representatives on June 20 - the first day of Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Kai's visit to the US. The trio included evangelist Truong Tri Hien, a member of the Vietnam Mennonite Church led by the imprisoned Rev Nguyen Hong Quang.

Hien listed 77 separate incidents of harassment against his church in Ho Chi Minh City between June 8, 2004, and May 31, 2005 – including meetings being broken up and Rev Quang's family home being raided on several consecutive nights.

- Praise God for the courage and determination of Pastor Truong, who continues to preach the Gospel despite knowing it will land him in jail. Pray that he will be a powerful witness both to his doctors and fellow patients – but also to some of Vietnam's top officials with whom he has shared in the past. Ask God to keep him safe – and pray for his prompt release.
- Pray for Vietnam's Premier Phan Van Kai – who has been a target of Pastor Truong's evangelism in the past. Pray that he would bow to international pressure for religious tolerance in his nation.

2. The Indonesian House of Representatives has called on the government to take immediate action to end conflict in the troubled area of Poso in Central Sulawesi.

A special committee on Poso says extraordinary laws are needed in an area where standard laws have proved ineffective in curbing violence. Among its recommendations is legal protection for eye witnesses appearing in court to offer accounts of violent incidents. It is also insisting that police should be given legal powers to disarm the population of Poso.

'We are forcefully asking President Yudhoyono to issue special legislation for Poso,' said committee member Sembiring Meliala, quoted on AsiaNews.

The committee, called Pansus Poso, is also urging central government and the authorities in Poso to revive the Forum for Inter-religious Dialogue so that it might become a partner in helping to end the crisis. The forum has been inactive for more than six years.

Calls for intervention at state level have been prompted by several outbreaks of violence including the two bombs which exploded in a Tentena marketplace on May 28, killing 21 people.

While more than 85 per cent of Indonesians are Muslim, the population of provinces such as Sulawesi and the Moluccas is almost equally divided between Christians and Muslims. Tentena town in Poso has become a refuge for Christians fleeing violence in other parts of Central Sulawesi.

In West Java, meanwhile, three women awaiting trial for 'proselytising' Muslim children have been refused bail – and so cannot care for their own children at home.

Dr Rebekka Zakaria, Eti Pangesti and Ratna Bangun of the Christian Church of David's Camp in the town of Hargeulis were arrested after inviting Muslim children to a picnic held as part of a church-run children's programme. Now held at the Indramayu State Prison, the women face up to five years in jail if found guilty.

According to Compass Direct, Bangun has had to send her children to live with their grandfather in Sumatra. The children of the other two women are being cared for at an undisclosed location.

No date had been set for their first court appearance at the time of writing.

- Pray for Dr Rebekka Zakaria, Eti Pangesti and Ratna Bangun who face a worrying wait before their trial. Pray too for their relatives – some of whom have been forced to go into hiding for fear of intimidation during the trial. Pray that the women would be released without charge.
- Pray that the state government and local authorities would unite to take immediate action to end the violence in Poso.

3. Church leaders in northern Nigeria have submitted a strongly worded document about Christian persecution to a conference on constitutional reform.

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) wanted to make the point that Nigeria is increasingly an Islamic nation, not a secular one as stated in its current constitution.

The purpose of the National Political Reform Conference, to which the CAN memo was submitted, was to draft a revised constitution and then present it to the Nigerian Premier Olusegun Obasanjo.

As well as documenting instances of violence and discrimination against Christians in its memo, CAN expressed concern that state governments in northern Nigeria are increasingly 'Islamic institutions which use public funds to promote Islam', says Compass Direct.

It also stated that religious policies discriminate against Christians in terms of them being denied land for building churches, media coverage and Christian religious instruction in schools.

'In some of these states [including Kano state], land has not been given or allocated to our members to build churches in the last 35 years,' the memorandum reads. 'The denial of such land to build places of worship is a way of causing religious disharmony in the country and most especially in the northern states.'

CAN hopes that President Obasanjo will hold true to his word when he stated on national TV in February that he saw the conference as providing 'one major chance that we all have to be part of history, to put all our cards on the table, to discuss as one family, engage in exchange of ideas, vigorous debate and innovative involvement in shaping the future of our nation'.

The National Political Reform Conference met between February 21 and June 21.

- Pray that the National Political Reform Conference would reflect these concerns of church leaders in northern Nigeria in its draft constitution. Pray too that President Obasanjo and his government would be committed to ensuring religious freedom for all in their nation.
- Ask God to strengthen and envision His church in Nigeria, particularly in the 12 northern states now under the Islamic legal system, Sharia law.

4. Radical Muslims in Pakistan have attacked Christians and their homes after claims that a Christian man had committed blasphemy against Islam.

The attacks near Peshawar followed accusations that Yousaf Masih, who is over 60, had burned pages with Koranic verses on them at his employer's premises.

The Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) USA quotes local sources as saying that Yousaf had been cleaning the office of a military officer and come across some 'rough papers' which the major had instructed him to burn. When other workers saw Yousaf setting fire to the papers, they accused him of burning pages from the Koran.

In fact Yousaf, who has worked as a sweeper for the Pakistani military for almost 20 years, is illiterate and would have no idea what was written on the pages.

VOM USA reports that Yousaf was arrested by police at his house in Lama Veera, east of Peshawar in North West Frontier Province, that same day, June 28. Following his arrest, a group of angry Muslims arrived at Yousaf's home and beat up his three sons.

Some hours later, radical Muslims reportedly returned to the area and burnt about 200 homes in Lama Veera and two other areas nearby. Many houses were also looted, the mob stealing household goods such as TVs.

A Hindu temple in the area was also attacked, apparently because the mob initially believed Yousaf to be a Hindu.

A large police contingent has been drafted to all three affected areas to restore order – but, at the time of writing, the atmosphere remained tense. 'Christians are currently in fear of further attacks,' reports VOM USA.

- Pray for Yousaf Masih and his family. Accusations of blasphemy usually prompt radical Muslims in Pakistan to take matters into their own hands, often with violence.
- Pray for relations between Christians and Muslims in this area of North West Frontier Province. Ask God to restore calm and pour oil on troubled relations between the two faith communities.

Sources: AsiaNews; Christian Solidarity Worldwide; Compass Direct; International Christian Concern; Jubilee Campaign USA; The Voice of the Martyrs Canada; The Voice of the Martyrs USA.

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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