

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 6 February 2007

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.

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 amount of time you have to give. Church Reps are a vital part of the RI team. Please consider prayerfully if you can join us – and pray that many others will take on this role too. To find out more, ring 01689 823491.

1. INDONESIA

The Indonesian government appears to have launched a massive crackdown on extremists in Poso, after a wave of attacks on militant hide-outs.

Police have killed several Islamist suspects and arrested many more from among a rebel group which, they claim, has masterminded many violent attacks on Christians. The extremists on their wanted list are also suspected of whipping up tensions between Muslims and Christians in Central Sulawesi province as a whole.

In the most recent raid in the Tanah Runtu neighbourhood of Poso on January 22, 13 suspects were killed and 24 were arrested, according to The Jakarta Post. The newspaper reports that more than 50 other alleged militants managed to escape to hills and jungle. The rebels used firearms and bombs to try to fend off police; a large haul of ammunition and bombs were seized at their base.

Eleven days previously, police had raided a house in Gebang Rojo sub-district believed to be that of an Islamist militant. One suspect was shot dead in the raid and a further four were arrested. An Islamic teacher known as Rian was accidentally killed in the raid, sparking angry protests among local Muslims who assaulted and killed a policeman.

The manhunt has left Poso in a state of high tension. But prominent Muslim leaders have thrown their weight behind the government's campaign, conscious that extremists are 'tarnishing the image' of moderate Islam.

Meanwhile, in the trial in Jakarta of militants accused of beheading three schoolgirls in Poso in 2005, one – Lilik Purnomo – has confessed to their murder. He claims his fellow-accused, Irwanto Irano, was also an 'execution coordinator'. Purnomo also confessed to shooting Rev Susianty Tinulele in her pulpit in Palu in 2004.

- Pray that peace can be restored in Poso. Thank God for what appears to be a more proactive approach by the government to wiping out extremism.
- Pray for the families of the schoolgirls beheaded in Poso in 2005. Ask God to give them His comfort and grace as they relive their trauma during the trial.

2. CHINA

Seven police officers made an unprovoked attack on a prominent Beijing house church activist and his mother as the pair walked near the 2008 Olympic village.

Human rights lawyer Hua Huiqi and his 76-year-old mother were kicked to the ground and taken to the Olympic village police station for questioning. When Hua asked for his mother to be released, he was beaten repeatedly and had cold water poured over him.

The next day, January 27, Hua's wife Wei Jumei, an evangelist, received a phone call from police informing her that Hua had been sentenced to a month's detention. There has been no official written notification to date, according to China Aid. RI sources have not reported on the whereabouts of Hua's mother.

Hua and his wife are well-known for their work in helping persecuted and poor Christians from other parts of China who travel to the capital in search of justice. China's commitment to upholding human rights as part of its Olympic bid has been badly dented in this attack.

- Pray that Hua Huiqi and his mother will recover quickly from their ordeal.
- Pray that the international community would continue to put pressure on China to clean up its religious rights record.

3. PAKISTAN

Shahbaz Masih has been freed from jail after serving five of the 25 years he had been given for blasphemy – as two other Christians are arrested on the same charge.

Shahbaz, 28, was acquitted after a High Court judge in Lahore ruled he was 'mentally unstable'. His original trial had convicted him of tearing up a Koran in a Muslim graveyard in Faisalabad, but the appeal judge noted there had been no witnesses.

Shahbaz is now in hiding, for fear of extremist reprisals over his acquittal, and has yet to be reunited with his family in Lahore. RI partners have been supporting the family during Shahbaz's imprisonment.

Meanwhile, another two Christians have had their world blown apart by accusations of blasphemy. In Faisalabad, Shahid Masih, 17, has gone into hiding after being granted bail amid accusations he too had defiled the Koran. As 7x7 has reported, the teenager was accused of blasphemy after allegedly being involved in a theft.

While his family and supporters are pleased Shahid is out on bail – an unusual step for a lower court to take – they fear for his life. He too is in hiding.

And in a small village in Kasur district, a woman called Martha Bibi has been arrested on suspicion of blasphemy. RI sources say the accusations came after Martha asked a group of Muslims building a mosque to return building materials loaned from her shop. Martha was taken into custody after a mob surrounded her home, demanding revenge for derogatory comments she is alleged to have made about the Prophet Mohammed. RI partners have visited Martha's family (who are in hiding) to pray for and encourage them.

- Pray that almighty God will 'maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed' (Psalm 82) and bless Shahid and Martha with good lawyers. RI partners are involved in both cases.
- Praise God for the release of Shahbaz Masih, after five years in jail for blasphemy. Pray that he and his family will find a safe home.

4. ERITREA

Sixty-eight Christians have been jailed by the Eritrean authorities since the new year.

The first swoop took place at the Sawa military training centre, near the Sudanese border. Military commanders searched the belongings of student conscripts in a 'random check-up on the activities of Christian extremists' – and arrested 35 teenagers with Bibles.

Some 250 Bibles were discovered and subsequently burnt in front of the whole base. The 35 detainees were ordered to undergo 'severe military punishment', says Compass Direct.

The second raid as part of what appears to be a national crackdown on church activities took place in the northern town of Keren on January 5. Officers took the unprecedented step of arresting eight staff members from within government ministries, all of them Christians. Compass Direct says that this is the first time government ministry staff have been arrested simply on the basis of their religious beliefs.

Meanwhile, in the coastal city of Assab in the south, police arrested 25 Christians, including seven women, in their homes, workplaces and schools. This group were all taken to the Wi'a military camp and have reportedly faced pressure to recant their faith.

Eritrea has been one of the world's worst violators of religious freedom since it banned all faith groups except Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Lutheran groups in 2002.

- Ask God to strengthen the faith of the 68 Christians recently detained in Eritrea.
- Pray that the powerful witness of these Christians in jail and that of their families at home will bring many others to Christ. Pray that the church will grow in Eritrea.

UPDATE:

Fears are growing for a Sudanese woman who was forcibly returned to her family, despite the fact they had punished her for becoming a Christian. Police arrested five members of an Episcopalian church in Khartoum last May on suspicion of kidnap when the woman, known as Shiraz, disappeared last year. In fact Shiraz had fled her home and gone into hiding. When she reported to police to show she had not been kidnapped, officers took her back to her family. She has not been seen since. Please pray for her safety.

Sources: Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement; China Aid; Compass Direct; International Christian Concern; Middle East Concern; Reuters; Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan; The Jakarta Post; The Voice of the Martyrs Canada.

Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on Tuesday 20 February 2007.

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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