

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 7 June 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 21 June 2005.

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2. Fresh evidence suggests local authorities in north and central Vietnam are continuing to put pressure on Christians to renounce their faith.
3. Christians campaigning against the increasing power of Islamic priests or *mullahs* in Pakistan were publicly stripped and beaten by police.
4. Church workers in southern Sudan have been receiving training for the first time in years, thanks to Release's supporters.

1. Two carefully timed bombs exploded in a crowded market place in Tentena, Central Sulawesi, killing at least 21 people and injuring 42.

The first homemade bomb went off at about 8.15am when Saturday market was in full swing. The blast was heard up to a mile away. Then, as people rushed to help the injured, a second device was detonated near the market entrance, claiming many more lives.

The dead included two pastors, two policemen and a young child. The death toll may rise: some of the wounded are in a critical state.

Tentena, which is in Poso district, has become a refuge for the many Christians who have fled their homes in the district since violence took hold in 1999. It is also home to Rev Rinaldy Damanik, a peace campaigner jailed on charges of 'carrying illegal weapons' and released last November.

The culprits have not been identified but it is believed that Islamist militants are responsible for this attack. 7x7 reported on May 10 that police investigating an attack on the village of Ranu in West Sulawesi had uncovered plans to carry out terror attacks and bombings as part of a countrywide *jihad*. There have been two other bombings in Poso since the April 24 raid on Ranu.

A week before the Tentena bombings on May 28, Rev Damanik had said he was optimistic about the future in this troubled region, according to Compass Direct.

Indeed, an uneasy peace between Christians and Muslims in Poso has held since the Malino Peace Accord was signed in 2001, after two years of violence. Observers fear that militants may be determined to undo bridge-building work between the two communities.

RI sources say that emotions are running high in Tentena, particularly among young people, and that there is a real fear of retaliatory attacks.

- Pray for the friends and families of all those killed and injured in Tentena market.
- Pray that the people of Tentena, Muslims and Christians alike, would resist the temptation to turn on one another, but instead commit to working for peace and reconciliation. Pray for Christian leaders such as Rev Damanik as they encourage their congregations to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus.

2. Fresh evidence suggests local authorities in north and central Vietnam are continuing to put pressure on Christians to renounce their faith.

The Vietnamese service of Radio Free Asia (RFA) has carried first-person reports from Christians in Lao-Kai, Thai Binh and Gia Lai provinces who have been harassed or attacked in recent months.

In each case, when local authorities were challenged about their ill-treatment of Christians, they denied any abuse had occurred.

One account was provided by a Hmong villager from Ta-phin in Lao-Kai's Sapa district. Giang-A Tinh, 27, told RFA that 12 families had had their rice fields confiscated because they refused to turn their back on the church. Tinh, his mother and brother were beaten up for refusing to recant their faith; his brother 'remains bedridden'.

A Christian from the same village Tr'ang-A-Cam, who was also beaten up, fled with Tinh to Hanoi, to plead with central government to intervene. Cam was reportedly told, 'If you don't put up an altar to the ancestors, you don't have the rice fields of the ancestors.'

The chairman of the People's Council in Ta-phin village denied any beatings had taken place, according to RFA which broadcasts from Washington DC.

In a second account, a preacher and his assistant were beaten with sticks in the northern province of Thai Binh as village officials looked on. Preacher Nguyen Van Cam and his friend Dien had been detained by police and warned about associating with villagers. They were then taken outside where a group of ten people surrounded and beat them.

When Nguyen Van Cam submitted a complaint to the district police, he was asked to change his statement 'from religious persecution to personal conflict'. 'But I refused,' he said.

Again, local authorities denied any such incident had occurred, according to RFA.

- Pray for the 12 families from Ta-phin in Lao-Kai who have had their land and livelihoods confiscated because they refused to turn away from Christ. Pray too for Nguyen Van Cam and Dien, that their ministry would flourish.
- Pray that international pressure will be put upon Vietnam to remain true to its commitments, made as recently as February, to 'ensure that each citizen's freedom of religion and belief practice is observed'.

3. Christians campaigning against the increasing power of Islamic priests or *mullahs* in Pakistan were publicly stripped and beaten by police.

Even before Christian activists had begun their rally, even before they had left their offices in Lahore, police raided their premises, charging them with their batons.

International Christian Concern reports that 'at least 10 busloads of university students' also weighed in to the fray. These students were reportedly members of the Jamaat-e-Islami political party which has alleged links with al-Qaeda.

Police and students dragged women protestors down the road by their hair and then stripped them of their clothes; most of the women were then taken to the Race Course Police Station for Women. The men were given a severe beating before being taken, with a few of the women, to Model Town Police Station.

No formal charges were brought and the protestors were released later the same day.

- Pray for the Christian protestors involved in this incident. Pray that they would remain committed to peaceful means of protest and to fostering good relations between Muslims and Christians in Lahore.
- Pray that the moderate majority of Muslims in Pakistan would take a stand against the *mullahs* or Islamic priests whose increasingly hard-line diktats are making life increasingly difficult for moderate Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

4. Church workers in southern Sudan have been receiving training for the first time in years, thanks to Release's supporters.

Potential evangelists, Sunday School teachers and youth leaders have been travelling for days to attend training sessions organised by a Release partner

in western Upper Nile. One man walked for two days then canoed through the swamp for a further three to reach his destination.

Sudan's civil war meant that, until recently, the church was not free to train its members and so strengthen its core workforce. The Christian community of southern Sudan has suffered greatly over the past 20 years: hundreds of thousands were displaced, made homeless and killed.

The need for this training was immediately evident as the Church Support Project got underway. RI's partner reports that 'almost half' of the participants had no Bible. 'We asked them why. The response was that their congregation only had one Bible, or two if they were fortunate, and they did not want to leave their congregations without.'

The project's potential is huge. Church workers were given a thorough grounding in 'the fundamentals of the Christian faith', everything from Old Testament study to teaching on Christian marriage – much of which was new to them.

'This is not a criticism of the church but a reflection of the extent to which the civil war has affected not only the social structures of communities but also has weakened the ability of the church to perform its pastoral functions,' says the RI partner which organised the project.

Participants have now gone home with evangelism materials and a set of books including a Bible, a Bible dictionary and an HIV/AIDS book in the Nuer language.

Western Upper Nile, which will come under southern Sudan's semi-autonomous administration for the next six years, lies close to the boundary with the mainly Arab and Muslim north. The church's proximity to the north here is seen as an added reason for it to be strengthened.

- Thank God for the determination of the participants in the Church Support Project in western Upper Nile. Ask God to bless them and build up their faith.
- Pray that these participants will go out into their communities and disciple others who will, in turn, reach out to yet more people. Pray that the church will experience a strong revival in this region.

Sources: ASSIST News Service; Compass Direct; International Christian Concern; International Friends of Compassion; Poso Watch Network; Radio Free Asia; Release International; The Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) Canada; VOM Indonesia.

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, RI serves persecuted Christians in 30 countries around the world, by supporting pastors and their families, supplying

Christian literature and Bibles and working for justice. RI is a member of the UK organisations Global Connections (formerly EMA) and the Evangelical Alliance.

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