

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 8 January 2008

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 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 Gene on 01689 823491.

1. PAKISTAN

Life is likely to become even more dangerous for Christians in Pakistan after the assassination of pro-democracy campaigner Benazir Bhutto.

Even before Bhutto's death, Christians were experiencing a backlash from the government crackdown on Islamist extremism. RI's partner Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan had already predicted increasing pressure on Christians, particularly in northern areas, in 2008.

But their situation is set to become even more precarious in the turmoil that has followed the suicide bombing on Bhutto's campaign rally in Rawalpindi on December 27.

Lahore archbishop Lawrence Saldanha expressed the church's 'deep shock and grief' over the death of a 'courageous, liberal and progressive leader' who had a large following among Christians. The Punjab chairwoman of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan Hina Jilani said the assassination marked 'the darkest hour in Pakistan's history'.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide notes that the Rawalpindi rally was attended by senior members of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance, a group campaigning for equal rights and religious freedom for all.

Christmas saw no let-up in the pressure on Pakistan's church. In Lahore alone, a church and a Christian school became the latest casualties in the campaign to harass Christians.

Last month the government of Punjab ordered the St Francis High School to be demolished – apparently because it occupies a piece of land much sought after by local businessmen. Six days later, on December 16, a mob bulldozed a church in the Abubakar Block, Garden Town – as police looked on, according to International Christian Concern.

- Ask God to strengthen the faith of His people in Pakistan, to stand firm amid the turmoil.
- Pray that, when Pakistan holds its elections, the new government will give Christians and other minorities the same rights in law as the Muslim majority.

2. NORTH KOREA

A North Korean Christian detained in China for helping his compatriots escape Pyongyang's brutal regime is now safe in South Korea.

It was feared that Yoo Sang-joon might be repatriated to North Korea where imprisonment or even execution would have been his likely punishment (7x7, November 27, 2007). Of all North Korean's many 'dissidents' in jail, Christians receive some of the worst abuse.

But Christian Today has confirmed RI partner Helping Hands Korea's cautious hopes that Yoo was repatriated to his adoptive home of South Korea, where he also holds citizenship.

The three defectors arrested with him in China in August, however, have probably fared less well: the online news site, The Daily NK, quotes Yoo as saying that all three have been sent back to North Korea.

Yoo devoted his life to helping North Koreans seek asylum in safe countries after he managed to escape to South Korea. His own story is tragic: he lost his wife and one son to famine in North Korea – and his elder son died trying to cross the Mongolian border.

Yoo told The Daily NK that he would no longer be able to work in China – but would continue to 'look for paths to quietly help' refugees trying to flee North Korea.

- Thank God for Yoo Sang-joon's determination to continue his dangerous work.
- Ask God to bless and protect all those involved in helping North Korean refugees escape Pyongyang's repressive regime.

3. CHINA

A Christian bookseller operating within government restrictions has been arrested at his shop near Beijing's Olympic village.

Chinese officials have not yet told Shi Weihang's family the charges against him – but his wife believes his arrest has something to do with his refusal to register his house church. A female employee at the bookstore, Tian Hongxia, was also detained.

Shi, 37, opened the Holy Spirit bookstore in a north Beijing office tower in March 2006 and has only ever sold books for which he had government permission, according to his friends.

Shi's Antioch Eternal Life Church meets in a room next to the store and has a congregation of between 20 and 30 people. His church does *not* have the government's seal of approval. But as Shi's wife Zhang Jing told *USA Today*, 'If we register, the government would supervise us and demand reports on speakers and all attendees.'

His family has learnt that Shi is being held at the Qinghe Detention Centre in Beijing in a cell with no heat and was not issued with any clothing. When his family protested, they were accused of 'neglecting' Shi by not providing any clothes for him. He is also being subjected to sleep deprivation, says China Aid. The prison authorities had to be lobbied hard before they agreed that Shi could be given medicine daily for his diabetes.

Police have reportedly confiscated Christian literature from his store and home. Zhang and their two daughters, aged seven and 11, have gone into hiding.

- Thank God for Shi's bold witness. China Aid reports that since his detention Shi has shared the gospel with more than 20 prisoners.
- Ask for God's protection over Shi's family and the rest of his congregation.

4. INDIA

The authorities in India's Orissa state have barred investigators from a district where up to 60 churches were attacked over Christmas.

Up to six Christians are reported dead in Kandhamal district and as many as 400 Christian homes destroyed after violence flared on Christmas Eve and continued for seven days.

Hindu extremists linked with the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP) have been widely blamed for the violence. The BBC reports that some Christians retaliated, attacking a VHP leader, although a local source has denied this.

Much of the conflict has centred on the Baliguda sub-district of Kandhamal, where most of the population is tribal, according to Compass Direct. Dr John Dayal, Secretary General of the All India Christian Council (AICC), says many Christians have fled their villages.

Dr Dayal also reported anecdotal evidence that displaced people were being 'forced to convert to Hinduism if they are to get food, medical attention and shelter'.

RI sources suggest that riots were triggered by concern about people from low castes turning to Christ. Orissa is one of several Indian states to have introduced 'anti-conversion laws' which, many believe, are aimed at curbing Christian evangelism. The first violence was focused on the Church of our Lady of Lourdes in Brahmani village, where the congregation were pitching a tent for their Christmas celebrations.

When opposition political parties and the AICC tried to send fact-finding teams into the area, they were prevented from doing so 'for the sake of law and order'. There are fewer than 900,000 Christians in Orissa, which has a population of 36 million.

- Pray for God's protection over His church in Kandhamal and a return to order.
- Pray that the Orissa authorities would do more to protect the Christian minority.

UPDATE:

An Indonesian court has sentenced three Islamist extremists to 19, 14 and 10 years in jail for beheading three Christian schoolgirls in Poso, Sulawesi, in October 2005. Other convictions included involvement in the shootings of Rev Irianto Kongkoli and two Christian schoolgirls in 2006, and marketplace bombings in Tentena and Palu in 2005. Pray for the families of those who died at their hands.

Sources: AsiaNews; BBC; China Aid; Christian Today; Christian Solidarity Worldwide; Compass Direct; International Christian Concern; OneFreeKorea; The Daily NK; The Times of India; USA Today.

Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on Tuesday 22 January 2008.

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.

To stop receiving the prayer alerts or change address, please write to or telephone:

Release International, PO Box 54, Orpington, BR5 9RT, UK.

Tel: 01689 823491

General enquiries: info@releaseinternational.org

Website address: www.releaseinternational.org