

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 10 May 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 24 May 2005.

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4. Arsonists have burnt down a chapel in Kaduna, Nigeria, for the fourth time in five years.

1. The Vietnamese authorities released Mennonite Sunday School teacher Le Thi Hong Lien – only to rearrest her two days later.

Lien, who was so badly abused in jail that she suffered a nervous breakdown, walked free from the Bien Hoa Mental Hospital on April 29, after a storm of international protest at her plight.

Then, on May 1, 30 police raided her church as worshippers prepared to give thanks for Lien's release. Officers rounded up members of the congregation, took them to the ward police station for interrogation and threatened them with further beatings.

Lien and the others do not yet know if further charges will be brought against them.

Lien, 22, was one of six Mennonite Christians from Ho Chi Minh City convicted last year of 'resisting officers of the law doing their duty' after challenging undercover agents who were monitoring their church. Two of the six, church leader Rev Nguyen Hong Quang and Pham Ngoc Thach, an evangelist, remain in jail.

The shocking details of Lien's treatment in jail over the last 10 months have been broadcast worldwide. She was injected with drugs, beaten senseless and deprived of food; some reports says she was electrocuted. Her jaw was broken and remains painful because she was not given adequate medical treatment at the time.

Her first words to her father Le Quang Du were reportedly: 'I am in great suffering from the top of my head to the extremities of my body. Father, please pray for me. I am very tired.'

Her release was part of a prisoner amnesty to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the capture of Saigon by North Vietnamese troops. She was one of six 'political prisoners' freed.

Rev Quang's congregation, the Vietnam Mennonite Church which meets in his home in District 2, Ho Chi Minh City, have been repeatedly harassed by police since their pastor's arrest. His wife Le

Thi Phu Dung has been told religious activities are banned at her address – but meetings continue regardless.

Lien's father Le Quang Du has been told that his family must stop attending meetings at the Quang home – but he insists that they will continue to worship there. He has also said that he forgives Lien's prison guards.

This sustained persecution of Rev Quang's church appears to be in retaliation for his outspoken criticism of the authorities in his role as a human rights lawyer.

The Vietnam Mennonite Church has recently issued the following statement: 'Our church would like to take this opportunity to express our sincerest gratitude to all who have prayed for and with us.'

- Thank God for the early release of Le Thi Hong Lien and pray now for her complete physical, emotional and spiritual healing.
- Praise God for the powerful Christian witness of people such as her father Le Quang Du, prepared to forgive his daughter's tormentors. Ask God to strengthen and embolden the Vietnam Mennonite Church in Ho Chi Minh City so that their witness would silence their oppressors.

2. Police investigating an attack on a village in West Sulawesi say they believe it may have been part of a broader campaign to terrorise Christians.

Four people were killed and two others were seriously wounded when militiamen raided Ranu in the predominantly Christian district of Mamasa at 9am on a Sunday, firing shots and setting fire to homes.

According to Asia News, eyewitnesses said that villagers fought back and, with the help of police reinforcements, forced the gunmen to flee.

The Voice of the Martyrs Indonesia reports that 300 villagers abandoned their homes to seek refuge in the next village.

Two days after the raid, Police Chief Inspector Saleh Saaf made a statement revealing that a 22-year-old suspect had been arrested and been found to have documents detailing 'plans to carry out terror attacks and bombings across the country'.

Police believe there are possible links between this attack and incidents in Poso and Ambon, according to Asia News. These include two bombs detonated in Poso since the Mamasa attack.

If extremist activity is proven, these groups may well be trying to exploit existing tensions between Christians and Muslims in West Sulawesi. The province has been the scene of repeated clashes between the two faith groups over the past three years since the government created two regencies – Mamasa and Polewali Mamasa – out of one, the original Polewali Mamasa regency. Unrest has been focused in three Muslim sub-districts included in the predominantly Christian regency of Mamasa.

- Pray for the friends and families of those who died in the Sunday morning raid on Ranu. Pray that the villagers who fled their homes will be able to return to Ranu and be offered greater security and protection.
- Ask for God's grace for the Christians of Mamasa so that they would resist the temptation to retaliate and instead be peacemakers in the regency.

3. Former rebels from southern Sudan are meeting with the Khartoum regime to work out how to implement the peace deal signed in January.

The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), the political wing of the SPLA, are locked in talks with the Government of Sudan with the principal aim of agreeing a new constitution. The outcome of this, it is hoped, will be a coalition cabinet of former rebels and Khartoum ministers in a 'government of national unity', according to the BBC.

The south of the country is scheduled to gain autonomy for six years in July, with former rebels heading up administration from the town of Rumbek. In 2011, southerners will then vote in a referendum to decide whether to remain part of Sudan, or become independent.

Other southern Sudanese groups – political parties, armed groups and communities - are now pushing to be represented in the south's transitional government. Separate talks have been held in Nairobi, Kenya, to find ways to include them in the process.

Meanwhile, international donors meeting in Norway have pledged US\$ 4.5bn to fund the return of refugees and rebuild the infrastructure of southern Sudan, recognised as one of the world's poorest regions. The UK alone pledged \$545m.

The rest of the money needed is expected to come from Sudan's oil revenues – a provision made in January's peace accord. The United Nations Security Council has recently agreed to send a 10,000-strong peacekeeping force to southern Sudan to monitor the peace deal.

Sudan has been at war since independence in 1956, apart from an 11-year respite from 1972 to 1983. Conflict resumed in 1983 when the government, dominated by northern Arabs, tried to impose Sharia law across Sudan, even in the south which is predominantly Christian and animist.

- Pray for the key negotiators involved in talks to try to build on January's peace deal and set Sudan moving along the road to peace, restoration and recovery.
- Pray for displaced communities now returning home to southern after, in some cases, years of exile. Pray that they would be accepted and reintegrated properly.

4. Arsonists have burnt down a chapel in Kaduna, Nigeria, for the fourth time in five years.

In this most recent attack, the Conquerors Chapel in the Hayin Banki sector of Kaduna city was set alight as soon as the pastor and elders had left the church after a meeting.

'Just eight minutes after we departed, I was called on the phone [and told] that the church had been set on fire by some Muslims,' Rev Ndubuisi Chiazor told Compass. 'The building was completely razed within 40 minutes. Everything we had has been completely burned.'

His congregation, the Word of Faith Ministries, have rebuilt their chapel after each previous attack. But numbers have dwindled from 500 to 150 over the past five years, some leaving the city out of fear.

Pastor Chiazor suspects Islamist extremists living in the neighbourhood of carrying out the attacks. Compass reports that the congregation have been told on numerous occasions to abandon their church and allow a mosque to be built in its place.

'Let me assure you that this church will not move out of this place,' Rev Chiazor said.

The onset of the arson attacks coincided with Kaduna state adopting Sharia law in 2000. Soon after the Islamic legal code was adopted, Muslims built a mosque next to the Word of Faith Ministries' chapel and have been pressing for the church's demolition ever since.

Meanwhile, in Plateau state, one of the biggest denominations in northern Nigeria, the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN), has decided to relocate its headquarters, amid continuing violence against the Christian community.

COCIN is relocating from Wase to Kadarko due to 'the complete destruction of all our churches in Wase town and the killing and displacement of the church members in the area', according to COCIN President Dr Pandang Yamsat.

COCIN announced last year that more than 175 churches in the Wase area have been utterly destroyed.

Local government officials have admitted that, although Christians displaced by violence in Wase now want to return home, they are being prevented from doing so by Muslims who have 'taken over their homes and property'. Deputy state governor Michael BotMang has said these Muslims must now relinquish hold of illegally held property 'or face the wrath of the law'.

- Thank God for the resilience of the Word of Faith Ministries congregation in Kaduna city. Pray that God would multiply their number even in the midst of persecution.
- Pray for leaders of COCIN as they regroup and plan their strategy on how best to continue ministering to Wase, amid mounting hostility among Muslims towards Christians.

Sources: Asia News; BBC; Compass; International Christian Concern; Release International; The Jakarta Post; The Voice of the Martyrs Canada; The Voice of the Martyrs 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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