

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7X7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 13 November 2007

This is the fortnightly 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 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. PAKISTAN

Pakistan's beleaguered Christians will be at even greater risk of attack under a state of emergency, RI's partners warn.

General Pervez Musharraf's decision to impose emergency rule and suspend the constitution on November 3 was, he said, an attempt to crack down on extremism.

But the decision has been widely condemned at home and abroad as a move that may deepen the political crisis. The Supreme Court, due to rule on the legality of Musharraf's October election victory, was surrounded by troops and private media taken off the air. At least 40 members of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan were arrested.

Lawyers from the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS), an RI partner based in Lahore, say that emergency rule and the suspension of constitutional rights will only make long-suffering religious minorities, including Christians, even more vulnerable.

Meanwhile, the misery for Pakistan's Christians continues. The 70-odd Christian families in the Swat valley of North West Frontier Province are a case in point. New reports say they are now being forced to conform to Sharia law and wear Islamic dress, just to avoid standing out from the Muslim majority.

Sharia is being imposed in the valley by militants angry at the government crackdown on Islamabad's Red Mosque in July. The militants, who are engaged in bloody clashes with government troops, have backed up verbal threats with bombings and beheadings. The church-run Public High School in Sangota, where staff and pupils have received death threats (7x7, October 16, 2007), has been forced to close amid the violence.

- Echo CLAAS' prayer for Pakistan: 'Please pray for us, so that our Lord God may give us strength to face harsh realities (...) and may we succeed in achieving our goal of democracy, freedom and peace.'
- Ask God to strengthen the faith of the Christians of Swat valley and grant them His peace.

2. SUDAN

North and south Sudan have 'recommitted' themselves to peace, after a few tense weeks when relations threatened to break down entirely.

Southerners became so frustrated with lack of progress on the 2005 peace deal that the south's main party withdrew its ministers from the national government last month. Tension had been brewing for months and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) finally lost patience with its northern partners.

Former rebels in the SPLM accused northern politicians of dragging their heels over boundary demarcations and the withdrawal of northern troops from southern Sudan. They were also angry that there is still no resolution on who should control Abyei, an oil-rich region straddling the north-south border.

Southern leader Salva Kiir, who is also vice-president of the government of national unity, warned recently that there could be a return to war if progress on peace remained slow.

Recent crisis talks between northern and southern politicians in Khartoum seem to have averted a showdown. UN Special Envoy Andrew Natsios told the BBC that both sides have now agreed to 'fully implement' the 2005 peace accord which ended the civil war.

Mr Natsios said that sticking points such as northern troop withdrawal had been agreed. The two important issues still remain unresolved: north-south border demarcation and control of Abyei. On these issues, both sides are 'showing flexibility', said Mr Natsios.

New threats to security in the mainly Christian and animist south continue to surface. A recent report in a southern newspaper, The Juba Post, reveals that key southern politicians and religious leaders feature on a hit list drawn up by a training cell preparing Islamist militants for jihad in the south.

- Pray that southern and northern politicians alike will set aside party politics and implement all elements of the 2005 north-south peace deal by the end of 2007.
- Pray that governments including our own would hold the Khartoum government to its commitments to bring lasting peace to Sudan.

3. INDONESIA

Forty-one Christian leaders in Indonesia have been sentenced to five years in jail for praying that Muslim leaders would 'come to Christ'.

The leaders, who are linked to Campus Crusade for Christ, were found guilty of blasphemy at a prayer meeting in East Java in December 2006. The meeting was videoed – and a copy of the video leaked to a Muslim organisation. They then handed the tape to the media.

The specific charge levelled against the Christians was 'abusing the Koran' – because the group were filmed praying over a copy of Islam's holy book. The case was brought under Article 156 KUPH, which mandates a prison term for anyone 'expressing hatred or opposition, or insults an individual or groups of Indonesian citizens in public'.

The convicted Christians include parents of young children. Their lawyers say the group is planning to appeal at the East Java High Court in Surabaya.

An official from the highest Muslim authority in Indonesia – the hardline MUI – said that a total of 60 Christians were being sought in connection with the video. 'We don't want revenge but only justice,' said an MUI spokesman.

- Pray for the 41 Christians convicted of blasphemy; pray their appeal will succeed.
- Pray for the Indonesian church in general, that it would stand firm despite pressure from Muslim hardliners.

4. CHINA

The Chinese authorities are trying to shut down a large firm in Guangdong province – apparently because it has a Christian ethos and employs church-goers.

Guangzhou Enoch Biological Science and Technology, part of an international ecological company, first had its offices and factories raided in August. More than 35 staff were interrogated and some of them beaten. Valuable property including computers was seized.

In September the company's assets were frozen and its owners, a Christian couple named Daniel and Eliza Ng, were put under house arrest for a fortnight and charged with 'illegal business management and tax evasion'. Their personal assets have also been frozen.

China Aid's sources suggest that central government is upset that the Enoch Group has hired a large number of Christians. It also suspects that Enoch's ethos – 'love, peace, joy and faithfulness' – promotes Christianity. Mr and Mrs Ng, both Australian citizens, have filed an appeal to Guangdong officials and approached the Australian consulate.

Pray

- Pray that the full force of the Enoch Group's international connections can be brought to bear, so that charges against Mr and Mrs Ng are dropped.

Act

- Mark the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church this Sunday (November 18) by encouraging your congregation to sign our China petition, calling on the Chinese government to respect religious freedoms for all. Download a copy at www.releaseinternational.org/idop – or ring 01689 823491.

Sources: BBC; BosNewsLife; Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement; China Aid; Compass Direct; International Christian Concern; Reuters; The Juba Post; The Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) Australia; VOM Canada; Watani International.

UPDATE:

The trial of five men accused of murdering three Christians at a publishing house in Malatya, Turkey, begins on November 23. Necati Aydin, Ugur Yuksel and Tilmann Geske were brutally murdered in April (7x7, May 1, 2007). The defendants, all aged 19 and 20, have confessed. Please pray for the families and friends of the murdered Christians.

Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on **Tuesday 27 November 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.