

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 14 February 2006

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.

1. PAKISTAN

Christians in Pakistan are bracing themselves after Pakistani Muslims reacted angrily to cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed in European newspapers.

As anger spread across the Muslim world, at least one church in Pakistan has been attacked, in a move which local Christians are interpreting as retaliation for the cartoons, BosNewsLife reports.

A group of about 20 Muslim men and women rounded on a church in the village of Kanwanlit in Punjab, and smashed doors, a window and the altar.

Eyewitnesses told Pakistan's Daily Times newspaper that the invaders 'spat on the Bible and hymn books' after trampling them under foot. While Christian men were held at gunpoint, Muslim women attacked Christian women: a 70-year-old woman was left with two broken legs and a 50-year-old suffered serious injuries to her back.

Asia News reports that the whole community was threatened with further violence if they took the matter to court.

The National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP), a Pakistani human rights organisation, has reportedly linked the attack to a local land dispute: a local Muslim is said to have seized land owned by the church. Christian groups have since said, however, that the publication of Christian cartoons has fuelled animosity towards believers.

The NCJP has now called on the government to offer greater legal protection to Christians, citing examples such as the Sangla Hill raids of November where the law has failed them. 'Violence against the weaker communities is reappearing because the government has failed to take measures in response to incidents that happened before,' said the NCJP's Peter Jacob.

- Pray for members of the Kanwanlit church attacked earlier this month. Pray that their faith would be strengthened by this attack, and that they would withstand intimidation.
- Pray for Christians in Pakistan – and in other Muslim-majority countries – who face a potential anti-Christian backlash after cartoons offensive to Muslims were printed in western newspapers. Pray that these Christians would promote tolerance, not retaliation.

2. SUDAN

The Khartoum government is accused of violating Sudan's peace deal by trying to evict the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) from troubled parts of eastern Sudan.

BBC reports suggest that government troops have been attacking Eastern Front rebels with aircraft and artillery around the town of Hamesh Koreb. Soldiers are also reported to have ordered former rebels from the SPLA to leave the area, in a move interpreted by the SPLA as an 'act of aggression'.

The SPLA's Major General Waya Nyipuocs said the order had come from 'heavily armed men backed up by four tanks'. 'It is a violation of the peace agreement and it is very dangerous,' he told Agence France-Presse.

This antagonism between the authorities in Khartoum and former southern rebels comes despite the fact that President al-Bashir's National Congress Party and the political wing of the SPLA signed a power-sharing deal last January. Together they formed a new government of national unity last September.

Hamesh Koreb, which lies 310 miles north-east of Khartoum, was the largest town controlled by the SPLA in eastern Sudan during the civil war. The Sudan Tribune reports that the SPLA was scheduled to withdraw its troops from Hamesh Koreb by January 9 but delayed its exit for 'logistical and technical' reasons.

Khartoum's troops have ignored a deadline to withdraw from southern towns such as Juba.

The International Crisis Group, an influential policy group, has described the situation in east Sudan as a 'powder keg' that could spark another war and jeopardise last year's north-south peace deal. Rebels in the Eastern Front claim they are being marginalised in the current political process.

- Pray for greater unity between the different parties which now make up Sudan's new government of national unity. Pray that they would commit to put aside personal ambitions and promote peace for Sudan.
- Pray for an end to conflict in eastern Sudan. Pray that disgruntled eastern rebels would be included in the peace process and have their concerns heard and addressed.

3. NIGERIA

Fourteen churches in one town have been earmarked for demolition in one of Nigeria's northern *Sharia* states.

Christians in Zamfara report that, as well as the 14 congregations in Gusau town which have received demolition notices, several other churches across the state have had the same news.

The demolition programme is thought to be the work of state governor Alhaji Ahmed Sani, an Islamic hardliner.

In fact, the programme dates back to 2003 when St Peter's Anglican Church in Governor Sani's home town of Bakura was destroyed on his orders. The church's pastor received a visit from a town councillor who announced the church would be demolished the following morning – before Governor Sani arrived later that day.

'The governor is from Bakura and, because he is the champion of Islamic *jihad* in Nigeria, he felt it would be unwise for a church to be seen in his home town,' said Anglican bishop of Gusau, John Garba Danbinta.

Rev James Obi, secretary of the Zamfara state chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria, had his Channel of Blessings church in Gusau demolished in 1997. Now, he has been told his rebuilt church is to be destroyed too. 'It is just a matter of time, and these churches will be no more,' he told Compass Direct.

Since the introduction of *Sharia* or Islamic law in 2000, Christians have found it impossible to obtain land to build new churches – yet Governor Sani is reported to have built more than 70 mosques with public funds in the past five years.

'No single church has been built by this same government. How fair is this?' said Rev Barnabas Sabo, a pastor from Gusau town.

- Pray for Christians in Zamfara state whose right to worship freely is being eroded. The introduction of *Sharia* was ostensibly to 'guide Muslims in their faith' but is being used to limit the religious freedom of non-Muslims.

- Pray for Zamfara state governor Alhaji Ahmed Sani, who is thought to be behind the church demolition programme. Pray that the federal government would intervene by insisting that the governor's actions are unconstitutional.

4. ERITREA

Eritrean military authorities have jailed 75 Christians at a military training camp - for 'reading Bibles and praying during their free time'.

Most of those arrested are students doing their compulsory national military service in Sawa, a remote area in western Eritrea near the border with Sudan. Thirty-seven of the 75 are women.

Compass reports that the conscripts who were put under 'military detention and punishment' had not tried to hold a Christian meeting or broken military law in any way.

'In Sawa, to possess your own Bible and keep your personal devotion and loyalty to Christ is not allowed,' an Eritrean Christian told Compass. 'This is considered an act of Christian extremism.'

Muslim conscripts at the training camp, by contrast, are allowed to have a copy of the Koran and pray five times a day.

President Isaias Afewerki heads up a Marxist-style government which in May 2002 banned all Christian groups except Evangelical Lutherans, Roman Catholics and Orthodox ones. An ongoing crackdown on church activities is focused particularly on evangelical and Pentecostal groups.

- Pray for the 75 Christian conscripts who are being punished for their faith. Pray that their arrests would help spread the Good News through the Sawa military camp, as others question them about their faith.
- Continue to pray for greater religious freedom in Eritrea, which is becoming increasingly repressive of religious minorities such as Christians.

NEWS UPDATE:

7X7 reported in November that three Indonesian schoolgirls were beheaded on their way to school in Poso, Central Sulawesi. A fourth girl, Noviana Malewa, escaped with serious machete wounds. Noviana remains under police guard, as a crucial witness to her friends' murder. Pray for her complete recovery: she still suffers severe facial and jaw pain.

Sources: Agence France-Presse; Asia News; BBC; BosNewsLife; Compass Direct; Daily Times (Pakistan); International Christian Concern; Sudan Tribune; The Voice of the Martyrs Canada.

Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on Tuesday 28 February 2006.

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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