

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 14 March 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. VIETNAM

Pastor Pham Ngoc Thach, the last of the so-called Mennonite Six, has been released from jail after two years of abuse and hard labour.

Thach walked free from Z30A prison in Dong Nai province on March 3, to be met by members of his Ho Chi Minh City church and his pastor and fellow inmate Rev Nguyen Hong Quang.

The Vietnamese Mennonite Church immediately issued a statement thanking all those who had 'prayed... and supported our workers imprisoned because of their faith'. The release of the six, two of whom were set free before their sentences were up, would not have happened without people praying and campaigning on their behalf, it said.

It also called on the Vietnamese authorities to 'cease their abusive and oppressive actions towards religious organisations in general and the Mennonite church in particular'.

Since his release, Thach has been detailing his treatment in jail. He was held in up to four prisons in different provinces. He was abused and tortured, both by his guards and by other prisoners acting on orders from the prison authorities, according to Compass. The Voice of the Martyrs Australia reports that he was also forced to do hard labour, which included digging graves for those who died in jail.

His health has suffered considerably: he has had serious back pain and lost some sight in one eye. Despite all this, he still claims his innocence and remains defiant: 'I am not afraid of telling the truth.'

Thach, who was convicted of 'resisting an officer doing his duty', was arrested in 2004 along with five other members of the Vietnamese Mennonite Church, after challenging undercover police agents who were staking out their church. According to church officials, Thach and colleagues had merely insisted that police investigations should follow the correct legal procedure.

At the time of his arrest, Thach was working as an assistant to Rev Quang and as an advocate for religious rights on the legal committee of the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship.

- Thank God for the release of Pham Ngoc Thach at the appointed time – and pray for his physical, emotional and spiritual recovery from his ordeal.
- Pray that the Vietnamese authorities would now give Thach and the rest of the Vietnamese Mennonite Church some respite from the harassment to which they have been subjected for the past two years.

2. NIGERIA

Churches in Nigeria are urging Christians worldwide to stand with them in prayer as inter-religious violence threatens to spiral out of control.

The backlash to the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed in western media has continued, as Islamist radicals apparently exploit anti-Christian sentiment and long-standing sectarian divisions.

In one of the latest outbreaks of violence, Muslims reportedly killed 10 Christians and set nine churches alight in Kontagora, Niger state. Baptist pastors attending a conference in the town were also attacked during a worship service, according to Rev Samuel Ayuba Shaba, secretary of the Niger state chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria.

Dave Dykgraaf, an American missionary serving with Christian Reformed World Missions in Niger, reported seeing posters in villages around Kontagora, warning, 'You Christians go back to your land. If you do not go back, we will kill you.' Dykgraaf was forced to flee with his family to Abuja.

Meanwhile, in Potiskum, Yobe state, youths reportedly burned churches and Christian-owned houses. Violence has previously been reported in Borno, Katsina, Bauchi and Gombe states.

IRIN news reports that in the city of Onitsha in Anambra state, southern Nigeria, groups from the mainly Christian Igbo people launched revenge attacks on Hausa-speaking Muslims from the north. Youths, reported by Lagos' *Daily Champion* newspaper to be carrying machetes and clubs, killed 'dozens' of people and set fire to mosques and Muslim properties over two days.

Compass also reports Christian reprisal attacks in Enugu city in the southern state of Enugu. These attacks were rumoured to have been triggered when a Muslim policeman killed a Christian boy.

- Pray for an end to the cycle of violence which has encompassed Nigeria since the publication of Danish cartoons. Pray that the voice of the moderate majority would prevail.
- Pray for Christians and other religious minorities in Nigeria's northern states who are feeling increasingly vulnerable to attack and harassment.

3. PAKISTAN

Two Muslim seminarians from Punjab have been jailed for 25 years for their part in the murder of a Christian youth whom they tried to convert to Islam.

Ghulam Rasool and Mohammed Tayyab were found guilty of the murder of 19-year-old Javed Anjum, in a courtroom in Toba Tek Singh packed with students from their *madrassa* (Islamic school). The pair were convicted of abducting and torturing Javed at the Jamia Hassan Bin Murtaza *madrassa* after the teenager stopped there for a drink of water in April 2004. Javed died of his injuries in Faisalabad, several weeks after his abduction.

Prosecution lawyer Khalil Tahir Sindhu is reportedly intending to appeal to the provincial high court to have the sentence raised to the death penalty.

A third suspect, Umar Hayat, who has been at large since the case began in May 2004, was finally detained by police last December. He will be tried separately.

Meanwhile, reprisal attacks against Christians following the publication of 'blasphemous' cartoons of Mohammed have continued. This has prompted church leaders to announce a plan to establish 'crisis centres' across Pakistan to prevent local inter-religious rows escalating into wider violence.

- Thank God that justice has been done on behalf of Javed Anjum and his family. Ask God to protect Pervez Masih and his lawyer from further threats and harassment.
- Pray that church leaders' plans to set up crisis centres across Pakistan would pave the way for a move of greater tolerance between Muslims and religious minorities.

4. CHINA

A Bible school in Anhui province has resumed business as usual – after a raid by Public Security Bureau officials who arrested 36 people and confiscated thousands of Christian books.

According to eye witnesses, up to 60 officers armed with electric shock batons, including members of anti-riot squads, surrounded the house church school in Huaibei City on March 1.

Everyone in the building – house church leaders, students and teachers – were arrested. The school's owner, Pastor Chu Huaiting, was arrested at his home some three hours after the raid. China Aid reports that 200 new blankets and 10,000 copies of Christian literature, which were being delivered to Pastor Chu's home as officials arrived, were confiscated.

China Aid reports that all detainees were set free in the evening of the same day: it claims that the top PSB official in the province ordered their release in response to mounting international pressure. The school's Christian literature has, however, not been returned. It has reportedly been handed over to a government committee which will rule over whether or not it constitutes 'illegal literature'.

Pastor Chu, currently vice-president of the Chinese House Church Alliance, is no stranger to harassment: he was arrested and detained by PSB officials as recently as February 26, when he was preaching at a house church in Jiangsu province. His premises in Huaibei City double as both a Bible college and sewing school, so students receive a trade as well as Bible instruction.

- Thank God for the release of all 36 people arrested in the raid on Pastor Chu's Bible school – and pray for the safe return of its Christian literature.
- Pray that the Bible school's teachings will have an impact, not just on Anhui province but on all provinces from which its students are drawn.

NEWS UPDATE:

RI has learnt that Xu Shuangfu and 16 other leaders of the Three Grades of Servants church have been tried in China. They are falsely accused of the murder of 20 leaders of the Eastern Lightning cult. The outcome of the trial is not yet known but, if convicted, they could face the death penalty. The defendants told the court that they had endured horrific torture in custody. Xu was arrested in April 2004 and 7x7 reported shortly afterwards that Xu's family feared he had been executed. His colleague Guo Xianggao, arrested on the same day, died in police custody (7x7 June 8, 2004).

PRISONERS OF FAITH MINISTRY:

Our Prisoners of Faith Ministry provides pastoral care and practical support for Christians imprisoned for their faith. An email alert is sent free monthly, highlighting an individual Christian prisoner, giving prayer points and addresses for letter-writing. To receive these alerts, please contact the office or sign up by visiting our web site: www.releaseinternational.org/prisonersoffaith

Sources: China Aid; Christian Solidarity Worldwide; Christian Today; Compass Direct; CRC News; Daily Champion (Lagos); IRIN News; The Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) Australia; VOM Canada.

Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on Tuesday 28 March 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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