

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 17 January 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. INDONESIA

The Indonesian government has stepped up its security operations after a bomb exploded in a 'Christian' market on New Year's Eve.

The blast shattered the peace in a bustling market place in a Christian area of South Palu, Central Sulawesi, in the early morning, and left eight people dead. Fifty-six other people were injured, some seriously. A second unexploded bomb was later found in the same area.

People had been busy busying pork for their celebration meals, opposite the Bethel Church in Mahesa. The bombing of a Christian market selling meat considered 'unclean' by Muslims has led many observers to suspect Islamic terrorists of involvement in the attack.

The government responded by setting up a new *kopskam* or security operation command made up of military and police officials. The Jakarta Post reported that the *kopskam* intended to send 1,100 extra police officers and an unspecified number of soldiers to Poso and Palu.

This show of military force may not reassure the Christian community of Central Sulawesi who are reported to be increasingly nervous. Reinforcements posted to the province last year failed to prevent a series of atrocious attacks on Christians including schoolgirls being beheaded and shot in Poso in November.

The Central Sulawesi administration has promised to pay medical expenses of all those injured in the Palu blast, some of whom have now been transferred to a more specialised hospital in South Sulawesi.

- Pray for the families of those killed and injured in the Palu market bombing.
- Pray that communities around the Mahesa area of Palu would respond with compassion for these families and unite against the terrorist threat which hangs over Central Sulawesi.

2. PAKISTAN

Release International partners took part in a demonstration against the government's failure to uphold justice for Punjabi Christians caught up in the Sangla Hill attacks.

Christians and Muslims joined together to protest outside the Lahore Press Club at government inaction after the raid on the village in which many Christian buildings were damaged. Joseph Francis, Coordinator of the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS), a Release partner based in Lahore, was among the protestors.

The demonstration appears to have had some effect. All accusations of blasphemy have since been dropped against Yousaf Masih, the Christian alleged to have set fire to a library of Islamic books – allegations which first triggered the riot on November 12.

In exchange, no further action will be taken against the rioters, according to the Pakistan Daily Times newspaper.

Tensions in Sangla Hill have remained high.

Campaigners for justice had alleged that the police had been tardy in their investigations, despite making 86 arrests, and that nothing had been done to protect the Christian community from continuing harassment including death threats. Christians fled their homes on the night of November 12 – and some had been forced to leave again since then.

The All Pakistan Council of Churches had reportedly written to President Musharraf urging him to ensure the perpetrators are arrested.

Two churches were burned to the ground when the 3,000-strong mob went on the rampage; a nursing hostel, a nuns' hostel, a convent school and a number of Christian homes were also set alight.

Reconstruction work has been hampered by lack of funds, according to the Pakistan Daily Times.

- Thank God for the release of Yousaf Masih who was held in custody for almost two months. His brothers were tortured for information about Yousaf's whereabouts until he gave himself up to police. Pray that the whole family will recover from their ordeal.
- Praise God that moderate Muslims stood in solidarity with their Christian brothers to protest against government inaction. Pray that this unity will help prevent any further violence.

3. SUDAN

Peace in Sudan is under threat because, a year after the peace deal was signed, its people have yet to experience a 'peace dividend', observers say.

People in southern Sudan – where civil war claimed two million lives over 21 years – say they feel forgotten, abandoned and fearful of a return to war, according to the BBC.

Southerners, who are mainly Christian and animist, accuse the former Khartoum regime of breaking its word on sharing oil revenues equally between north and south. The south remains without any substantial infrastructure despite donor pledges last year amounting to \$4.5 billion. Many communities still lack proper food and water.

More than half a million refugees are expected to return to southern Sudan this year.

'People in Sudan are not treated equally... and peace will not stay until they are,' medical worker Francis Gatluak told the BBC.

At a ceremony to mark the one-year anniversary of the peace agreement in the southern town of Juba, former rebels from the Sudan People's Liberation Movement admitted that little progress had been made in the past 12 months.

Sudan analyst Peter Moszynski told the BBC: 'The peace dividend has not been delivered. There is very little sign of change in the south.'

The BBC also reports claims that elements of the old Khartoum regime are still arming militias that continue to terrorise southerners. These militias have apparently ignored calls for them to join either the northern or southern armies.

- Pray that concerted efforts will be made by politicians of all parties to ensure that the people of southern Sudan will start to feel the benefits of peace in tangible ways.
- Praise God that a fragile peace has held in much of Sudan. Pray that peace would return to troubled areas such as Darfur in the west and insecure parts of the south and east.

4. CHINA

A prominent human rights lawyer is continuing to document instances of religious persecution in China – despite threats on his life by the authorities.

Gao Zhisheng, who defended Pastor Cai Zhuohua against charges of illegal business practices last year, has suffered increasingly brutal harassment: from being nearly driven off the road to having his Beijing legal firm shut down for a year (as reported in 7x7 on December 6). His licence to practice law has also been suspended, in apparent retaliation for years of human rights work.

The 41-year-old has been in hiding in northern China since the trial – but refuses to be silenced.

He has now issued a report on Christian persecution in Xinjiang province. The testimony of 13 believers bears witness to the torture and abuse that the underground house church movement is suffering at the hands of the authorities.

One man reported being beaten with police officers' belts before being chained to a radiator for two days. Another detailed how his wife was slapped and kicked during 48 hours of interrogation. A third told how he sustained a fractured rib after being kicked in the chest.

Mr Zhisheng alleges in his report that 'a huge police force' exists solely for the purpose of suppressing freedom of belief in China. 'Brutally cracking down on people's freedom of worship results from a habit of resilient thuggery inherent in this system,' he writes at the close of his report. 'It is time for an immediate awakening!'

Mr Zhisheng, an army veteran and former Communist Party member, is reported to have become a Christian recently.

- Praise God for Mr Zhisheng's bravery in speaking out against the authorities' attempts to suppress religious belief. Ask God to protect him and his family.
- Thank God for the determination of China's thriving underground church to continue to worship in the face of brutal persecution.

Sources: AsiaNews; Associated Press; BBC; Christian Solidarity Worldwide; Compass Direct; International Christian Concern; Jubilee Campaign USA; New York Times; Pakistan Daily Times; The Jakarta Post; The Voice of the Martyrs Canada.

Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on Tuesday 31 January 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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