

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 17 April 2007

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. NIGERIA

Churches in Gombe state are on high alert after extremists apparently stirred up schoolchildren to murder their Christian teacher in class. Two days later, they set fire to a church in the same town.

Christians are in shock after teacher Christianah Oluwatoyin Oluwasesin was beaten to death at a secondary school in Gombe town. RI partners are already supporting her family.

Oluwasesin was supervising an all-girl class during an Islamic religious knowledge exam when she collected papers, books and bags and dropped them in a pile in front of the class. One of the girls then started to cry: there was a copy of the Koran in her bag and, she said, Oluwasesin had desecrated it because she, a Christian, had touched it.

A riot ensued, in which Islamist extremists joined students in beating Oluwasesin to death. The body was then dragged out of the building and burned.

Then, on March 23, a crowd of extremists set fire to part of the Evangelical Church of West Africa in the Chanchanya section of Gombe. The sanctuary was gutted before neighbours and church members could put out the blaze. The congregation must now worship in the open air, according to Compass Direct.

Rev Rukun Gaius of the Gombe chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria says it has received intelligence that extremists are planning to burn down another 15 churches.

- Pray for the family of Christianah Oluwatoyin Oluwasesin. Ask God to provide good people who will comfort and care for them.
- Pray for Christians in Gombe for whom persecution has been a daily reality, since *Sharia* law was introduced. Pray against extremists' plans to burn other churches.

2. VIETNAM

A 60-year-old pastor accused of trying to undermine the government of Vietnam has been

jailed for the fourth time in two decades.

Thaddeus Nguyen Van Ly, who has already served a total of about 15 years in prison, was sentenced to eight years in a one-day trial on March 30. He was indicted for 'propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam' – as part of a sweeping crackdown on dissidents.

As 7x7 reported on March 6, Ly was placed under house arrest in February after officials raided the compound in Thua Thien-Hue where he lives with other clergy.

Ly's human rights work since the late-1970s has made him a key figure in Vietnam's pro-democracy movement. He was a founder member of Bloc 8406, a group named after the date in 2006 on which it launched its manifesto for reform.

Unexpectedly, the government allowed foreign journalists to observe Ly's trial. But this is probably not a sign that Vietnam is yielding to pressure to reform. Footage obtained by Reuters news agency clearly shows a guard clamping his hand over Ly's mouth as the pastor tries to speak in court. (View it at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dzk1WmmHoBI)

Four of Ly's colleagues arrested on the same day – Nguyen Phong, Nguyen Binh Thanh, Hoang Thi Anh Dao and Le Thi Hang – were also convicted. They were given between 18 months' suspended sentence and six years in jail.

- Pray for Nguyen Van Ly as he starts yet another jail term. Pray that God will use him in prison – and that his sentence will be reduced.
- Pray that the interest of the international media in Ly's trial will cause Vietnam to reflect – and reform.

3. PAKISTAN

A petty squabble between Muslim and Christian children has escalated into a major row in which five Christians from the same family have been charged with blasphemy.

Salamat Masih, his 16-year-old son Rashid and their relatives Sahibah Masih Mota and Shehla and Bao Masih, who all live in Toba Tek Singh, Punjab, have been charged under sections 295-A and 295-C.

Their accuser and neighbour alleges that Salamat and Bao snatched a sticker of the prophet Mohammed from his nephew and stamped on it. He also claims that the five defendants raided his house with weapons and hurled abuse at his family and Mohammed.

Local Christians allege that the neighbour's story is made up. They say the trigger for the arrests was a row between Salamat's 11-year-old son Daniel and some of his Muslim friends. The Muslim children reportedly beat Daniel when he refused to play with them. When Daniel's mother went to remonstrate with the parents, a heated argument ensued.

Local Muslims responded to the blasphemy allegations by stoning Christian houses and injuring a number of people, including a disabled man who was badly beaten. Salamat Masih is being held in police custody: the rest of his family has gone into hiding.

- Pray that charges against the Masihis will be dropped. Pray for their safety: extremists have killed people accused of blasphemy even before a conviction.
- Pray that the Pakistani government would respond to pressure to scrap its blasphemy laws which are frequently used to persecute Christians.

4. INDONESIA

Seventeen Christians have gone on trial for murder – amid mounting concern that the Indonesian judiciary is softer on Muslims.

In two separate hearings, groups of 12 and five Christians have appeared in court, accused of involvement in the murder of two Muslims in mob riots in Central Sulawesi last September. The unrest followed the hugely controversial execution of three Christians convicted of masterminding sectarian violence in 2000.

The 17 men are accused of setting up roadblocks in Poso, dragging two Muslim fish-traders from their truck and killing them. They are charged under anti-terrorism laws, which carry a maximum penalty of death.

It is not yet known how the defendants will plead. However, the defence team told Compass Direct that it intends to argue that the use of anti-terrorism laws is 'inappropriate'.

Indeed, there is mounting disquiet that the Indonesian authorities are being disproportionately tough on Christians. The trial, which began on April 2, follows hot on the heels of the conviction of three Islamist militants who beheaded Christian schoolgirls in Poso in 2005. They were given comparatively lenient sentences ranging from 14 to 20 years, because they had 'shown remorse' (see 7x7, April 3).

Campaigners insist that the case against the three Christians executed last September – Tibo, Riwu and da Silva – was much less clear-cut than that against these three militants.

- Pray that justice will be done and be seen to be done in the case of these 17 Christians.
- Pray for more grassroots movements which are aimed at creating unity and understanding between Christians and Muslims in Central Sulawesi.

Sources: Amnesty International; Asia Times online; Christian Solidarity Worldwide; Compass Direct; EarthTimes.org; Reuters; Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) Canada; VOM USA; youtube.com

RI'S NEWS WEBCAST:

RI has launched a ground-breaking online news bulletin: *World Update on the Persecuted Church*. This regular bulletin brings you face-to-face with the overcoming Church with stories, video and pictures. It's an indispensable resource for church services or prayer and home groups.

www.releaseinternational.org/pages/downloads/world-update-webcast.php

Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on Tuesday 1 May 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.

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