

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 20 March 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

Muslim students at a school in Kaduna state have tried to scupper Christians' attempts to rebuild their chapel, with two arson attacks in as many months.

Interfaith relations at the Government Science Secondary School in Zaria city have been strained since 2004, when Muslim pupils first burned down the Chapel of Adonai.

Tensions have soared again after two attempted arson attacks on the chapel which was only rebuilt last year. Christian staff and pupils managed to thwart both attacks – in December and January – by stamping out the fires before they took hold.

Pastor Samuel Nuhu, a teacher and patron of the Fellowship of Christian Students at the school, said the latest attack had not been unexpected. Two letters had been dropped into the chapel warning of violence unless Christian staff and students left.

The school was founded by the Church of Nigeria as a Christian high school and called St Paul's College. But the government forcibly took it over in 1973, changing its name and provoking many Christians to leave. Of its 1,000 students today, only 300 are Christian.

School officials say they have now notified the Kaduna state Ministry of Education about the threats to Christian staff and pupils – but with no effect, says Compass Direct. Kaduna state introduced *Sharia* or Islamic law in 2000.

- Thank God for the determination of Christian staff and students to resurrect their chapel. Pray that their right to worship freely will be respected and protected.
- Pray for improved relations between Muslims and Christians at the school, so that tolerance will take the place of enmity.

2. NORTH KOREA

North Korea is 'toughening up' its policies and penalties for citizens caught trying to defect, according to a new report.

US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) says that Pyongyang now hands down 'longer sentences in abusive prisons' if defectors are found trying to flee the country. A key turning point, it says, was 2004 when South Korea airlifted 468 North Korean refugees from Vietnam into the safety of its own territory – much to Pyongyang's fury.

Thereafter, says HRW, the punishment for illegal border-crossing has typically been several years in prison, where defectors face beatings, forced labour and starvation. Previously, the penalty was more likely to have been a few months in prison or labour camp – though RI sources report that some repatriated defectors such as Christians have been executed.

Indeed, HRW's report, which is based on interviews with North Korean defectors, confirms the widely held belief that Pyongyang reserves particularly brutal treatment for defectors who have met Christian missionaries and, worse still, those who have turned to Christ.

One woman from Saebiyul, interviewed in China, said: 'Now first-time offenders serve one year in regular prison, second-time offenders three years. Those who went to church [while in China] go to *kwanliso* [political prison camp] for 10 years.'

Tim Peters, director of RI partner Helping Hands Korea which supports North Korean defectors, says that the crackdown is symptomatic of a regime in meltdown. He claims chronic food shortages are leading to unrest, corruption and widespread disillusionment with political leadership: 'The picture I see is a regime that is desperate to maintain control of a population (which is) increasingly restive and even beginning to openly question. The decay of the system, in my view, has caused it to rot to the very marrow of society.'

Tim Peters says that some of the refugees with whom his organisation works say they were released early from jail because they were able to pay their way out.

- Pray that North Korea will succumb to pressure to allow international monitors in.
- Pray for the many Christians in North Korea who, with their families, are being punished for putting their faith in someone other than their leader Kim Jong-il.

3. VIETNAM

Vietnam's human rights record has taken another nosedive following the arrest of two more religious rights activists.

Barely a fortnight after the arrest of well-known pastor Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly, police arrested two lawyers – Nguyen Van Dai and Le Thi Cong Nhan – in Hanoi on March 6.

All three are now charged with 'propagating against' the government, according to Advocates International (AI), a Christian legal organisation. Ly remains under house arrest: Dai and Nhan have been ordered to be detained for four months, pending investigations.

AI reports that state-run Vietnam TV said that, when police raided Dai's offices, they confiscated 'many religious documents that were about to be provided to foreign sources'. Dai, who is also an elder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church, has been repeatedly harassed since August 2006 when he launched a pro-democracy bulletin.

Meanwhile, Reporters Without Borders says that Ly, who was arrested on February 18 (as reported by 7x7 on March 6), went on hunger strike from February 24 to March 5.

- Pray that the push for greater religious freedom in Vietnam would gather pace.

- Pray that God would fill the three imprisoned lawyers with His peace.

4. INDIA

Himachal Pradesh has become the seventh state of India to give the green light to 'anti-conversion' laws – much to the dismay of its Christian community.

State governor Vishnu Sadashiv Kokje has just signed off the Himachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Bill 2006, making 'unregistered' or 'unethical' conversions illegal.

Christians claim the bill is a complete misnomer as Hindu extremists have used such laws in other states to stamp out a wide range of Christian activities, including aid work.

The bill was passed in the state assembly last December. Soon afterwards, Hindu extremists demanded that a pastor in Kangra district close down his orphanage. They then pressured two residents of a drug rehabilitation centre in Khokhan village to make false complaints about a pastor and three Christian workers, according to Compass Direct.

While laws in other states has been linked to the political agenda of Hindu nationalists in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Himachal Pradesh is led by the ruling Congress Party, which claims to be 'secular' and so unbiased towards any particular faith group.

The other six states with anti-conversion laws are Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Arunachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat. Arunachal Pradesh and Gujarat, which approved laws in 1978 and 2003 respectively, have yet to implement the legislation.

- Pray that anti-conversion laws in Himachal Pradesh will not be implemented.
- Pray that the ruling Congress Party would stand firm against the Hindu extremists' agenda and uphold freedom of religion for all.

Sources: Advocates International ;AsiaNews; Assist News Service; BBC; Compass Direct; Helping Hands Korea; Human Rights Watch; International Christian Concern; News24.com; Reporters Without Borders; Reuters; World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission.

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 3 April 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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