

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 20 December 2005

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

Radical Muslim leaders in the troubled area around Sangla Hill have heightened tensions by demanding the public execution of a Christian they accuse of blasphemy.

A mob of more than 1,000 Muslims went on the rampage through the mainly-Christian community of Sangla Hill last month after rumours spread that Yousaf Masih, a Christian, had set fire to a room full of Islamic books, as 7x7 reported on November 22. Three churches, a convent and other Christian-owned buildings were destroyed in the ensuing riot.

RI sources say Muslim leaders are now urging local Muslims to unite and 'eliminate' all Christians – as well as insisting that Masih be hanged. The Voice of the Martyrs Canada reports that this rallying cry was given to 3,000 Muslims at Friday prayers at a mosque in Sangla Hill. Local government officials and a member of Pakistan's National Assembly were reportedly among the crowd.

Islamic clerics also claimed that Christians in Sangla Hill had set fire to their own homes.

Almost 90 people have been arrested since the attack but their supporters insist that they should be released without charge.

Yousaf Masih, who denies starting the fire, remains in custody. Sources say he gave himself up after learning that Sangla Hill police had arrested and tortured four of his six brothers. Masih had reportedly been gambling with Muslims in a stadium next to the library of Islamic books; the fire started soon after he left with his winnings.

Today, the Christian community of Sangla Hill, north-east of Lahore, is virtually under siege. Many are too frightened to leave their homes: some have been threatened with more violence. Hundreds of families are reported to have left the region.

President Pervez Musharraf has condemned the attack on Sangla Hill – but has also spoken out against the alleged blasphemy which triggered it.

Meanwhile, RI sources report that Christians have been evicted from their homes to make room for refugees from the earthquake which devastated Kashmir on October 8.

Bishop Anthony Lobos of Islamabad-Rawalpindi said that at least 40 families had been forced out of their homes in Sind province. 'We are the most vulnerable people, we are very poor and we are easy targets,' he said. The bishop is summoning legal aid to prevent further evictions.

- Pray for the Christians of Sangla Hill who are living in fear after suffering one of the worst attacks on a Christian community in recent years. Ask God to strengthen their faith so it will drive out all fear.
- Pray for Christian families in Kashmir who have reportedly lost their homes to quake victims. Thank God for people like Bishop Anthony who are prepared to stand up for these most marginalised of people.

2. INDONESIA

Muslim volunteers are joining forces with Indonesian police to set up patrols to protect Christian places of worship over Christmas.

A paramilitary youth group known as Banser told Reuters that hundreds of its members would help guard churches over Christmas. It also said that it would be calling on similar groups from other religions to do likewise. Banser is affiliated with Indonesia's largest Muslim group, Nahdlatul Ulama.

'Banser's participation is needed to give our Christian fellow citizens peace to celebrate Christmas,' Banser chief Sofyan Syauro told AsiaNews.

And at least 200 volunteers from Muslim groups are working with police in Malang, East Java, to search everyone entering Christian buildings.

Some 17,000 policemen are expected to guard Christmas celebrations in Jakarta alone.

Indonesia's National Intelligence Agency chief, Syamsir Siregar, recently warned religious leaders that he believed some radical Muslim groups were plotting bomb attacks later this month.

News of a security crackdown should be welcomed by Indonesia's Christians, who have suffered repeated violent attacks in recent months, particularly in the province of Central Sulawesi.

And the attacks continue. Earlier this month, part of the Beth Eden Protestant Church in Manado, North Sulawesi, was badly damaged in an arson attack. Its pastor Stephen Liow had received several threats of arson in recent months.

Meanwhile, in Tangerang county, west of Jakarta, police bulldozed five church buildings on November 30 as congregations stood and watched. Officials claimed that the churches 'violated residential bylaws', according to The Voice of the Martyrs Canada.

- Pray that Christians will face their Christmas celebrations with joy, not fear – despite the threats of bomb attacks and further violence.
- Thank God for the willingness of Muslim groups such as Banser to take a stand against violence and to stand with Christians. Pray that this gesture will be powerful in promoting greater understanding and unity between faith groups in Indonesia.

3. NIGERIA

A Nigerian pastor has been threatened with arrest if he does not 'hand over' to the authorities a Christian friend who was once a Muslim. This friend was in fact kidnapped by extremists three months ago and has not been seen since.

Pastor Zacheous Habu Bu Ngwenche had indeed been looking after Bature Suleimanu Idi who sought refuge in the pastor's home because he feared for his safety. But Idi was abducted by Islamist militants from in front of his pastor's home in September.

The authorities are now insisting that Pastor Zacheous produces Idi before the end of the year, despite the fact that it was the pastor who contacted police to report him missing.

Thirty-one-year-old Pastor Zacheous, who leads a church in Akwanga, Nasarawa state, is adamant. 'Idi was abducted in front of my house and taken to a mosque,' he told Compass Direct. 'I went and met the leaders of the Muslim community in this town to protest [about] the abduction. But they claimed that I was holding Idi against his will and was teaching him Christianity without the consent of his relations.'

The church leader has since been arrested twice for allegedly 'coercing' Idi to become a Christian – but the allegations were dropped when Idi persuaded police he had come to Christ voluntarily.

Pastor Zacheous now fears that Idi will be killed and has organised search parties to help find him.

Idi became a Christian when he was living in Bauchi state in northern Nigeria, under the discipleship of one of Pastor Zacheous' church members Adamu Bello. Bello sent Idi to Pastor Zacheous because he felt Idi's life might be in danger if he remained in a *Sharia* state.

Pastor Zacheous was himself raised as a Muslim but became a Christian as a young adult.

- Pray for Pastor Zacheous placed in an impossible position by authorities who appear to be responding to the whim of Muslim leaders.
- Pray for Bature Suleimanu Idi whose whereabouts are still unknown. Pray that his new faith will endure through this time of severe testing.

4. CHINA

Twenty-nine house church leaders were arrested when 40 police officers swooped on a church leadership meeting at a house in Henan Province last week.

About 100 leaders from Henan and Anhui provinces – including Pastor Shen Yiping, founder of the China Gospel Fellowship – had gathered at a home in Xiapigang village on December 12.

At about 3pm eight police vehicles pulled up outside. Officers proceeded to arrest 29 leaders and to confiscate their property, including three motorbikes. Pastor Shen was among those detained. According to China Aid, police declared the meeting to be 'an illegal religious gathering'.

All 29 detainees were released the next day after intense interrogation – but were warned not to hold any further 'illegal gatherings'. The Public Security Bureau of Xincui County has since refused to return any of the property confiscated.

The church leaders had assembled to discuss how best to support a large group of peasants in the area who had contracted Aids after selling their blood to local centres contaminated with the virus. The pastors have vowed to continue this ministry.

- Pray for the swift release of all 29 church leaders detained in Henan Province last week.
- Pray for all Christians being held in custody for their faith over Christmas. Pray that the 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace' (Isaiah 9:6) would be their close companion.

Sources: Aljazeera; AsiaNews; BosLifeNews; China Aid Association; Christian Solidarity Worldwide; Compass Direct; Reuters; The Voice of the Martyrs Canada.

Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on Tuesday 3 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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