

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 22 November 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.

In this issue...

1. A teenage girl is dead and a second is critically ill after Islamist extremists launched their second attack on schoolgirls in the same Indonesian town in two weeks.
2. Police in Punjab have arrested 90 people after a huge mob burned down Christian organisations and churches following an alleged desecration of the Koran.
3. Pastor Cai Zhuohua, a prominent Beijing house church leader, has been sentenced to three years in jail – four months after a guilty verdict was delivered for his part in distributing Christian literature.
4. Christian leaders in Sudan have been frustrated in their attempts to press the government to investigate an arson attack on a church in a Khartoum suburb.

1. INDONESIA

A teenage girl is dead and a second is critically ill after Islamist extremists launched their second attack on schoolgirls in the same Indonesian town in two weeks.

The two 17-year-olds in the most recent attack on November 8 were sitting on a terrace near a Pentecostal church when they were shot at close range by two men on a motorbike.

Siti Nuraini, a Muslim, died from a neck wound. Her friend, a Christian named as Ivon, is still in a critical condition after being shot in her left jaw.

This attack in the Gatot Subroto area of Poso comes just 10 days after extremists beheaded three girls and seriously injured a fourth as they made their way to school in the town.

The Jakarta Post has since reported that all four girls in the October 29 attack were cousins. Noviana Malewa, 15, who like her cousins attends the Central Sulawesi Christian Church High School in Poso, is still recovering in hospital in Palu.

The November 8 assault comes despite a massive influx of police and military to the island of Central Sulawesi, on the orders of President Susilo Yudhoyono. The Jakarta Post put the total of police and military personnel at 3,500 after reinforcements were drafted in.

One Christian leader in Jakarta told Compass he believed extremists were trying to revive tensions between Muslims and Christians which led to bloodshed between 1999 and 2001. 'This incident

shows there are some people in Poso who are still trying to reignite the conflict,' he said. 'We pray that God would stop future attacks, on both Christians and Muslims.'

- Pray for the friends and families of all six schoolgirls attacked in Poso in recent weeks. Pray that the friendship between Siti and Ivon, a Muslim and a Christian, will help faith communities unite against such violence.
- Pray particularly for wisdom and peace for Christian leaders who are trying to preach calm and forgiveness to their congregations amid rising tensions.

2. PAKISTAN

Police in Punjab have arrested 90 people after a huge mob burned down Christian organisations and churches following an alleged desecration of the Koran.

The Christian community of Sangla Hill, about 70km west of Lahore, had to run for their lives when more than 1,000 protestors went on the rampage on the morning of November 12.

The mob destroyed the Roman Catholic, Salvation Army and United Presbyterian churches, as well as a convent, a Christian school, a girls' hostel, a Catholic priest's residence and many other Christian homes. The All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA) said: 'Within minutes, the Christian residential area was blazing. Christian residents fled to save their lives.'

There are no reports of any injuries. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) says that in fact many Christian families had left the previous night after threats of violence.

According to the BBC, police officials say the unrest began after rumours spread that a Christian man had set fire to a library containing copies of the Koran. A blasphemy charge was registered against Yousaf Masih on November 11 but he has since gone into hiding. Masih had reportedly been gambling with Muslims in a stadium next to the library and the fire started soon after he left with his winnings.

CSW also reports that Christian schools went on strike on November 17 in protest at the attacks and the APMA declared seven days of mourning. Hindu, Sikh and Muslim leaders have united in condemning the violence at Sangla Hill.

- Pray for the Christians of Sangla Hill who lost so much in a single morning. Pray that their faith level would rise after this assault.
- Thank God for the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim leaders who came out in support of the Christians in condemning the attack. Pray that the legacy of the attack will be greater inter-religious tolerance and understanding.

3. CHINA

Pastor Cai Zhuohua, a prominent Beijing house church leader, has been sentenced to three years in jail – four months after a guilty verdict was delivered for his part in distributing Christian literature.

The long-awaited announcement of Pastor Cai's sentence for 'illegal business practices' followed months of intense international lobbying for his release. His wife Xiao Yunfei, her brother and her sister-in-law were also on trial. Xiao Yunfei was given a two-year sentence; her brother Xiao Gaowen was given 18 months but his wife was released.

Charges were brought after the authorities discovered 200,000 copies of the Bible and other Christian literature in a storeroom managed by Pastor Cai. Only one printing house in China is allowed by law to print Bibles and only registered churches are permitted to sell them.

Pastor Cai was reportedly abducted from a bus-stop by Public Security officers in September 2004.

Sources report that he has since suffered repeated electric shock torture and been forced to sign false confessions. He has reportedly been forced to work 'like a slave' peeling about 50lbs of garlic a day in his Beijing detention centre. His family is being made to pay up to £35 a month for Cai's living expenses there.

Pastor Cai's five-year-old son, who is being cared for by his grandmother, has not been allowed to see his parents since their arrest.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports that, on November 4, the Chinese authorities forced one of the law firms defending Pastor Cai to close for a year.

The sentencing on November 8 coincided with the arrival of President Hu Jintao in the UK. The Chinese premier was on a three-day state visit during which he met senior government and opposition parliamentarians, including Tony Blair.

- Pray for Pastor Cai and his family, separated under a system which does not allow groups to publish and distribute Christian literature freely. Pray that their witness will only make people more hungry for the kind of materials they have distributed.
- Pray for President Hu Jintao, that he would be swayed by international pressure to improve his nation's human rights record and by reformers in his own government.

4. SUDAN

Christian leaders in Sudan have been frustrated in their attempts to press the government to investigate an arson attack on a church in a Khartoum suburb.

Most of the Lutheran church in the El-Thawra district of Omdurman was completely destroyed; it was a simple structure of bamboo, poles and mud with a straw roof. A 200-strong congregation had worshipped there, unopposed, for 25 years.

When Lutheran church leaders inquired in the neighbourhood about how the fire started in broad daylight on October 18, people were 'too afraid to say anything', according to Rev Yousif El-Denger Z Kodi, general secretary of the Lutheran Church of Sudan (LCS).

Compass reports that LCS leaders filed a criminal case against unknown culprits at a police station on the following day – but there has still been no response from security authorities.

The LCS has since written to the Sudan Inter-Religious Council stating that it holds Sudan's new unity government responsible for solving this crime.

The Lutheran Church regards this incident as a test of the new Sudan's religious freedom. January's peace accord signed between the then government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement includes a declaration upholding freedom of religion and guaranteeing 'to all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground'.

- Pray for the congregation in Omdurman whose church was burned down. Pray that they would be able to find new accommodation quickly.
- Pray that Sudan's new unity government would now address concerns about this apparent attack on religious freedom and do all it can to safeguard that freedom.

*Sources: BBC; Christian Solidarity Worldwide; Compass Direct; Release International; The Jakarta Post; The Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) Canada; VOM Indonesia.
Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on Tuesday 6 December 2005.*

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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