

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 25 October 2005

This is the regular Prayer Alert service of Release International.

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 in your church and in other Christian meetings. The information can also be reproduced in church magazines and news bulletins, provided the source is acknowledged.

Our next Prayer Alert is due for issue on Tuesday 8 November 2005.

Special request

Please continue to remember Release International in your prayers over the coming weeks. Please ask God to provide us with the right person to fill a vacancy we have for a Supporter Relations Officer: we're looking for someone with at least two years' administrative experience. Thank you.

In this issue...

1. More than 7,000 Chinese Christians turned out for the funeral of a much-loved bishop – ignoring an official order not to attend.
2. Tensions between Indonesian church-goers and Islamist radicals are reaching a critical point as Christians continue to resist extremists' attempts to stop their worship.
3. Sri Lankan Christians have taken to the streets of Colombo in a prayerful protest against moves to clamp down on church activities.
4. A Nigerian pastor and his wife were beaten to within an inch of their lives – apparently on the orders of community leaders.

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1. More than 7,000 Chinese Christians turned out for the funeral of a much-loved bishop – ignoring an official order not to attend.

The local authorities had agreed that a public funeral could be held for Peter Zhang Bairen, a hero of the underground church, who died on October 12 in Hanyang, Hubei province, at the age of 91.

Yet, this turned out to be a hollow façade: secret orders were circulated by the provincial authorities forbidding believers from taking part in the ceremony in Zhangjiatai, the bishop's birthplace. The orders were allegedly circulated even before the authorities signalled their acceptance of a public ceremony for the bishop.

AsiaNews sources said that local believers felt tricked by the government who had created a semblance of religious freedom 'to save face'.

'There would have been many more people present if the government had not conducted its preliminary intimidation campaign,' reports AsiaNews.

Mr Zhang Bairen had spent a total of 24 years in prison or labour camps since 1955.

The local authorities banned the use of the title 'bishop' throughout the ceremony – but, in the course of the seven-hour event, a banner was raised bearing the words: 'Peter Zhang Bairen, unofficial bishop of Hanyang Diocese'.

Brother Chen who presided over the funeral, described Mr Zhang Bairen as 'courageous'. 'He lived his entire life always faithful to the Lord, without ever letting go of this faith, even in the face of threats from political powers,' said Brother Chen.

- Thank God for the determination of thousands of Christians in Hubei to pay their last respects to their bishop and stand up for their religious freedom in this way.
- Praise God for the powerful witness of Mr Zhang Bairen and the impact it has had on so many lives. Pray that the local government representatives who attended his funeral would be touched by this witness too.

2. Tensions between Indonesian church-goers and Islamist radicals are reaching a critical point as Christians continue to resist extremists' attempts to stop their worship.

For several weeks, Christians in East Bekasi, West Java, have been holding worship services in the street after the mayor and extremists closed down their church. On October 16, however, 300 of these same extremists laid out their prayer mats and held their own Islamic worship service on the spot outdoors where the church had been meeting.

Undeterred, the church congregation moved to another street – but were pursued by the extremists who reportedly insulted and attacked them. Rev Anna, the Presbyterian pastor, was pushed into a gutter and then mocked as she lay there.

'The commitment of the Christians was strong in the face of the opposition and they continued on with the service in the streets before disbanding and going home,' reports The Voice of the Martyrs Indonesia.

Observers fear that tensions could spill over into bloodshed if Christians continue to insist on their right to religious freedom. Christian lawyers have been holding talks with church leaders to decide how to respond to the harassment.

Meanwhile, the spate of church closures continues unabated. The mayors of Bekasi, Bandung and Sukabumi, West Java, have issued decrees closing three more churches. Others have been shut in Malang, East Java. In north Jakarta police have been collecting data on services held in 18 churches who now fear they may face imminent closure too.

- Pray for God's power and grace to rest upon church leaders in these trouble spots of Indonesia who face the dilemma of risking the lives of their congregation if they continue to defy extremists.
- Pray for all those churches which have been shut down in recent months: ask God to grant them the resourcefulness to find ways to worship unchallenged.

3. Sri Lankan Christians have taken to the streets of Colombo in a prayerful protest against moves to clamp down on church activities.

Sinhalese from many different denominations took part in a peace march from Katunayaka junction to Negomber Town Hall where an open-air prayer meeting was held.

One of its organisers' prayers was answered even before the march was held: a proposed amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution that would make Buddhism the state religion was not even debated for lack of support.

Buddhist monks in the National Heritage Party (JHU) had resurrected the so-called 19th Amendment after a failed attempt last year to get the legislature's approval of it (as reported in 7x7 October 11). But they failed even to get it debated on October 4 because it had stirred up a great deal of negative international publicity – something the Sri Lankan government is keen to avoid in the run-up to presidential elections on November 17.

The Christian prayer march on October 17 was also intended to send a strong message of disquiet about anti-conversion legislation currently being proposed by radical Buddhists in the National Heritage Party (JHU). Church leaders fear anti-conversion laws would be used against the Christian minority to curb church programmes.

Meanwhile, the JHU has thrown its weight behind the election campaign of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse who has expressed support for the radical Buddhist position on religious conversion.

Act

- Sign RI's online petition against proposed anti-conversion laws in Sri Lanka before November 6. Visit: www.releaseinternational.org or ring 01689 823491 for more details.

Pray

- Thank God for the witness of Sri Lankan Christians prepared to make a public stand for their religious rights in the full knowledge that it might provoke more harassment against them.

4. A Nigerian pastor and his wife were beaten to within an inch of their lives – apparently on the orders of community leaders.

Pastor Enoch Iburene and his wife Lovina had left their home in Ibeshe near Lagos at 6am when they came across a gang of six young men as they turned a bend. 'They were obviously waiting for us,' said Lovina. 'They descended on us, beating us with everything they could lay their hands on.'

According to the Nigerian news service, The Daily Sun, the couple believe they were attacked because, as evangelists, they had spoken out against the local custom of idol worship and against some criminal practices.

Pastor Enoch said: 'As ministers of God it will be counted unto us as sinful if we failed to talk to people about their sinful acts but, instead of heeding the voice of reason, they waged war on us, beating us black and blue.'

Pastor Enoch and Lovina are now calling on the Nigerian government to ensure religious freedom in their country. 'How long will this go on?' said Pastor Enoch. 'What happened to the freedom of religion that was stipulated in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria of which we are a part?'

The same question is undoubtedly being asked by Pastor Michael Agbahime whose church, The Deeper Life Bible Church, was demolished by local authorities and 'Sharia police' in Kano State.

The church was located on government property in the Kano State Police Command barrack and served the state's law enforcement personnel - until local officials ordered it to be pulled down.

The congregation 'now worship in the rain or under the heat of the sun', according to Compass Direct. Numbers have shrunk by one third to 100. Pastor Agbahime interprets the move as part of the growing campaign to Islamise his state. In Kano city, he said, most Christians 'have been either killed or displaced'.

- Pray that Pastor Enoch and his wife Lovina would draw closer to God so that He would draw close to them after their ordeal. Ask God to use their testimony to draw others to Christ.
- Ask God to bless and multiply the congregation of the Deeper Life Bible Church in Kano. Thank God for their determination to worship, even without a building.

Sources: AsiaNews; BosNewsLife; Compass Direct; International Christian Concern; Inter Press Service; Mission Network News; National Christian Fellowship of Sri Lanka; The Daily Sun (Nigeria); The Voice of the Martyrs Indonesia; The Voice of the Martyrs Canada.

This prayer alert is part of Release International's 7x7 initiative to encourage prayer and action for seven years for seven countries where Christians face 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 their families, supplying Christian literature and Bibles and working for justice. RI is a member of the UK organisations Global Connections (formerly EMA) and the Evangelical Alliance.

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