

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 27 September 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 11 October 2005.

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1. Campaigners are celebrating the release of Than Van Truong, a Vietnamese pastor held in a mental hospital for the past year – for refusing to deny his faith.

Rev Truong was declared 'insane' by authorities at the Bien Hoa mental hospital in Dong Nai province, kept in solitary confinement and injected with mind-altering substances to cure 'his religious problem'. As reported by 7x7 on July 5, his friends and family were concerned some of these drugs could be life-threatening.

Then, on September 16, Rev Truong phoned his wife in Ho Chi Minh City to ask her to collect him the following day when he would be freed.

The Baptist minister's release has been widely attributed to the advocacy and prayer of Christians worldwide who succeeded in embarrassing the Vietnamese authorities with unwanted publicity.

As his case became more public, the hospital authorities reportedly stopped giving Rev Truong the drugs which had made him ill. As his health improved, they allowed his wife to visit him more regularly. The Voice of the Martyrs Canada reports that he had been able to share the Gospel with his fellow inmates and had even baptised some who had come to Christ.

Rev Truong, a former Communist official and officer in the Vietnam People's Army, first drew attention to himself when he sent Bibles to the country's top brass. He was imprisoned for nine months in 2003 and, subsequently, was kept under surveillance until his arrest in June 2004.

- Praise God for the release of Rev Truong and for his steadfast refusal to deny Christ, despite inhumane treatment in hospital.
- Pray for all those who came into contact with Rev Truong in hospital, that their lives would be changed because of his powerful witness.

2. Christians have been worshipping on Indonesia's streets after radical Muslims closed down their churches in a concerted campaign to silence believers.

Up to 800 Christians held services in the open air after militants blocked roads leading to two churches in Bekasi, West Java, over the same weekend, according to The Jakarta Post. The paper reported that, though neither church had a permit, they had both been trying to register ever since they were established 15 years ago.

The weekend of September 3 and 4 also saw militants closing down a third church, this time in Madegondo village in Grogol, Sukoharjo, Central Java.

Approximately 300 militants gathered outside the house of Pastor Syarif Hidayatullah, who had applied for permission to use the top floor of his three-storey building as a place of worship.

The crowd surrounded the house on the Saturday evening, blocking even the armed police assigned to guard the house. The police eventually succumbed to the crowd's demands for the house to be sealed, according to the Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) Indonesia.

Objectors claimed the house church was disturbing the local Muslim community though neighbours interviewed by VOM Indonesia denied having any such concerns.

Meanwhile, the three Christian women convicted of trying to convert Muslim children have lodged an appeal against the three-year sentence given on September 1. Dr Rebekka Zakaria, Ety Pangesti and Ratna Bangun, who were all involved in a church-run children's programme in Indramayu, West Java, have been told their appeal hearing will be in about three months' time.

- Continue to pray for the release of church workers Rebekka, Ety and Ratna, who all have children of their own. Pray that the appeal judge would give them a fair hearing, in contrast to their trial this summer which was plagued by extremist protestors demanding a guilty verdict.
- Pray for the many congregations in Indonesia which have been driven out of their churches by Islamist extremists in recent months. Pray that their faith would be strengthened.

3. Sudan has moved a step closer to implementing its peace deal with the unveiling of part of the cabinet line-up for its new unity government.

President al-Bashir's announced how responsibility for the main government departments would be divided up among the different political parties in a TV address last week.

The announcement was reportedly delayed by wrangling over who should oversee the energy ministry – and the country's oil industry. Though most of Sudan's rich oilfields are in the south of the country, the energy portfolio remains with the

president's northern National Congress Party (NCP), to the disappointment of southerners.

Of the 29 ministries on the negotiating table, the NCP is now responsible for 16, including defence, interior and finance ministries. The BBC reports that former southern rebels now represented by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement have control of nine ministries and that the remaining four have been assigned to other political groups.

Sudan's oil issue has been at the centre of its long civil war and pivotal in peace talks leading up to January's historic accord. Observers believe that the persecution of Sudan's mainly Christian and animist southerners was at least partially motivated by the north's desire to take control of southern oilfields.

Under the terms of the peace accord, oil revenues will be split 50:50 between north and south.

- Thank God for the sustained progress being made in Sudan to restore political stability to parts of the country, despite continuing instability in areas such as Darfur.
- Pray for understanding and unity between ministers in Sudan's new government, so they would commit to the same goal: a just and lasting peace for the whole country.

4. Pakistani Muslims in Punjab's capital went on the rampage after a young Christian asked neighbours to turn their Islamic music down.

On September 9 Younis Masih went to the house of Baba Chaby in Waheed Park, Lahore, to complain about the noise level. In fact, Chaby was hosting a Muslim Imam who was conducting an Islamic service or 'Qawali' with mystical singing. Some reports say Younis asked what the songs were about, then left.

The next day some of those who had been in Chaby's house listening to the music went looking for Masih and reportedly beat him unconscious with sticks. When his wife Meena tried to stop them, she too was beaten and her clothes torn to shreds.

Shortly afterwards, announcements were reportedly made in local mosques that a Christian had committed blasphemy by making derogatory remarks about the prophet Mohammed.

About 400 Muslims then attacked and looted Christian homes; a church building was reportedly also damaged with stones. Sources say that up to 100 Christians fled the area in fear.

The angry crowd then demanded police register a blasphemy case against Masih – who was in the police station at the time, lodging a complaint about the attack on him. The All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA) reports that Masih was then taken into custody and tortured.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide says that Masih is now being held at a Lahore jail on a charge of blasphemy – a charge which his wife Meena strongly denies.

- Pray for justice for Younis Masih and his family. Ask God to flood their home and Masih's prison cell with His presence and His peace.
- Pray too for the Christian families now reportedly 'living in fear' since their homes were attacked. Pray for the Muslim community in Lahore, that moderate Muslims would unite in condemning the violence of more radical elements.

News update:

Pakistani Christian Maria Samar John has confirmed that she has had no news of her two young children since they were abducted by their Muslim father a year ago. 7x7 reported on September 28, 2004, that Joshua and Miriam, then five and three, were snatched by their father Abdul Ghaffar from a Lahore court where their divorced parents were engaged in a battle for custody. Maria, who is supported by Release's partner Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement, had herself been kidnapped, then forced to marry Ghaffar and convert to Islam. Pray that Maria will be reunited with her children soon.

Sources: BBC; Christian Solidarity Worldwide; Compass Direct; The Jakarta Post; The Voice of the Martyrs Canada; The Voice of the Martyrs Indonesia; The Voice of the Martyrs USA.

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, Release International 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.

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