

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 29 March 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 29 March 2005.

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2. Police have made further raids on the Mennonite Church of Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City – just as the Prime Minister was promising greater religious freedom.
3. Two disturbing attacks on girls in Pakistan have underlined the need for the authorities to offer greater protection for Christians – and particularly women.
4. Church leaders have expressed serious concerns about China's newly adopted Regulations on Religious Affairs, particularly over the issue of registration.

1. Church leaders in Nigeria's Adamawa state are calling on the government to intervene as tensions between Christians and peace-keepers continue to spiral.

Not long after peace-keeping soldiers shot dead a Christian woman in Numan without provocation earlier this year, the Christian community organised a peaceful protest march. It now emerges that this protest has triggered more killings and a spate of arrests.

The protest, which was held just over a week after Judith Lan'guti's death, saw Christians carrying a fake coffin through Numan's streets, to symbolise the church's mourning and its persecution.

The next day, according to Compass, Adamawa state officials organised a counter-protest. This triggered fighting between Christians and Muslims, the very violence which peace-keepers had been brought in to quell.

Police set about trying to round up Christians involved in the first protest and made a house-to-house search. Arriving at the home of one suspect and finding him absent, they arrested his mother. When a group of Christians gathered at the property to try to prevent police from detaining her, officers opened fire on the crowd, killing two youths, Ezekiel Eli and Kingsley Zadok Imburu.

Thirty Christians from the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria – including the Rev Nelson Malau – were arrested on that day and are currently standing trial in the state capital, Yola.

Christian leaders in Numan have now written to President Obasanjo calling for the immediate withdrawal of peace-keeping soldiers and an urgent investigation into the three recent killings and 30 arrests.

'Our women and youths are being assaulted daily, and arrests are being made on false claims,' they wrote. 'The shooting and killing of these two of our brethren goes to confirm our fears that there is a hidden agenda to persecute us because we are Christians.'

- Pray for the families and friends of the three Christians reported to have been killed in Numan so far this year. Pray that the 30 Christian protestors currently on trial will be acquitted.
- Pray for a groundswell of revulsion against the violence. Ask God to raise up key community and religious leaders who will promote unity and tolerance between different faith groups.

2. Police have made further raids on the Mennonite Church of Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City – just as the Prime Minister was promising greater religious freedom.

The church - the focus of an international campaign to free a group of its members now known as the Mennonite Six - was stormed on February 27 and 19 worshippers were taken away for questioning.

Then, on March 8, officers carried out a second raid, this time demanding that three women, including the wife of church leader Rev Nguyen Hong Quang, sign confessions and stop meeting. Five men were taken to a police station for questioning. All church members detained in these raids have since been released.

Radio Free Asia also reports that police broke up a meeting of the Tien Giang Province Baptist Church on March 6.

These three raids threaten to make a mockery of a policy document issued by Vietnamese premier Phan Van Kai just a few weeks earlier at the beginning of February, guaranteeing increased religious freedoms.

Also, Compass cites statements made by the Deputy Minister of Public Security Lieut General Nguyen Van Huong at a recent meeting with US diplomat John Hanford. It quotes the People's Police newspaper as saying, 'The Deputy Minister emphasised that Vietnam has no "religious prisoners" and Vietnam has never prosecuted or convicted a single person on the basis that they wanted to follow this religion or that.' It also said the minister had 'strongly affirmed that there is no one serving time in any prison who is mistreated'.

This last point is blatantly contradicted by the testimony of one of the Mennonite Six, evangelist Nguyen Van Phuong who was released earlier this month after serving one year in jail. His written report details relentless abuse at the hands of his fellow inmates and interrogators. 'When it was stifling hot during the day, they would make me fan them,' he wrote. 'And at night, when it was cold, they would force me to take a cold bath every five minutes.'

Though he is still being watched by security police and has been diagnosed as suffering 'extreme psychological stress', Phuong says he will resume his work for the church. 'In all things I continue to trust in God and I hold onto the word of the Lord.'

- Praise God for the courage and witness of evangelist Nguyen Van Phuong and for his determination to continue serving God.
- Ask for God's protection over the two churches known to have been raided over the last few weeks. Pray that the Vietnamese government will be forced to make good its promises about religious freedom.

3. Two disturbing attacks on girls in Pakistan have underlined the need for the authorities to offer greater protection for Christians – and particularly women.

In Lahore, RI's partner, the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS), is investigating the alleged kidnap of a 13-year-old girl from a poor family in Alipur Chattah. According to an eye-witness, Fozia Zafar was on her way to her uncle's house on February 8 when she was abducted by three young Muslim men – and has not been seen since.

Despite confessions from two of the men involved, police ignored repeated calls from Fozia's family to register a case and were only forced to do so when relatives issued a complaint to a senior officer two weeks later. Fozia's father has since lost his job at the Municipal Corporation and, according to The Voice of the Martyrs Canada, has come under pressure from 'influential Muslims' to withdraw his accusations.

Police in Karachi have apparently been equally lax in filing a case against a Muslim man accused of torturing his Christian wife to make her convert to Islam. Thirty-two-year-old Alina was severely beaten and bitten by her husband in front of Alina's brother when the latter defended his sister's right to choose her religion.

The husband has since visited Alina's family with a group of 12 armed men and warned them not to press charges.

Christian women are considered the lowest of the low in Pakistan and have long suffered discrimination to the extent that – as these two cases suggest – they can be attacked with impunity.

- Pray for Fozia's safe and immediate return to her family. Ask God to heal Alina physically and emotionally.
- Pray that the authorities will actively pursue both these cases and respond to pressure on them to defend Christians' rights.

4. Church leaders have expressed serious concerns about China's newly adopted Regulations on Religious Affairs, particularly over the issue of registration.

One key purpose of the directives, which became law on March 1, is to encourage thousands of China's underground churches to register. Compass reports that a government survey conducted last year found there were 'several thousand unregistered meeting points' in Beijing alone, with more than 100,000 members.

The government appears to be of the opinion that herding these masses into the official fold would have a stabilising effect, much needed in the run-up to the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

Younger house church leaders are said to be optimistic about being given the chance to register directly with the government rather than with the government-controlled church, the Three Self Patriotic Movement which is widely distrusted.

However, Compass reports that the older generation of church leaders, those old enough to remember the Cultural Revolution, are said to be much less likely to register, fearing tighter controls and more interference from officialdom.

Legal analysts have also raised concerns over the vague wording of the regulations which guarantee protection only to 'normal' religious activities. They see a clear loophole here – one through which unofficial churches might easily fall.

The legislation also specifies that a church applying for registration must have 'religious personnel or other persons who are qualified under the prescription of the religion concerned'. Members of unregistered churches do not qualify for admission to China's government-approved religious seminaries.

- Thank God for the leaders of China's unregistered house churches who face constant pressure from the authorities to compromise their beliefs.
- Continue to pray that the more liberalising elements in China's ruling party would gain more influence and push through policies promoting greater religious freedom.

Sources: Assist News Service; Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement; Compass Direct; International Christian Concern; Pakistan Christian Post; Radio Free Asia; 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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