

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday 29 May 2007

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.

PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS NEED YOU!

Release International (RI) wants to recruit volunteers from around the UK and Ireland to represent the needs of persecuted Christians to their churches. Could you be a Church Rep? Your core role would be to receive and disseminate information, and encourage prayerful support for RI's ministry within your church. How you develop the role depends on the amount of time you have to give. Church Reps are a vital part of the RI team. Please consider prayerfully if you can join us – and pray that many others will take on this role too. To find out more, ring 01689 823491.

1. PAKISTAN

Pakistan's parliament has aligned itself firmly with extremist hardliners by giving the green light to a bill making apostasy illegal.

The draft bill of the Apostasy Act 2006, which would impose the death penalty for any Muslim man converting to a different religion, went through unopposed on its first reading in the National Assembly this month. The bill, introduced by the opposition Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), will now be sent to a standing committee for consideration.

If the bill becomes law, it will be a huge blow for Pakistan's religious rights campaigners. While the worst punishment is reserved for Muslim men, any Muslim woman found committing apostasy would be sentenced to life in prison. An apostate would lose all property rights and custody of young children.

In the same session, parliament threw out a bill to amend Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws, which are widely abused to persecute non-Muslims. The proposer, an MP named Mr Bhandara, argued that the law should treat all Pakistani citizens equally.

He wanted to amend the laws to make it illegal to blaspheme the central figures of all religions, not just the Prophet Mohammed. He also proposed that the penalty should be reduced to five years in jail and a fine. But his bill was booed and rejected unanimously.

These are worrying times for Pakistan's church. Christians in Charsadda and Mardan in North West Frontier Province were recently warned in handwritten letters to convert to Islam or be bombed. Though the 10-day deadline they were given has now passed without incident, the Christian community are still fearful.

The government has failed to condemn the threats, thought to come from militant Islamists who bombed music and video shops in the province earlier this month.

- Pray for Christians in North West Frontier Province, fearful over recent threats. Pray that the threats come to nothing – and that God will give His people peace.
- Pray that the draft apostasy bill will not become law.

2. VIETNAM

Vietnam has defied its critics by giving long jail sentences to two high-profile Christian lawyers, so stifling yet more voices of dissent.

Nguyen Van Dai and Le Thi Cong Nhan, both well-known for their work in defending religious liberty, were sentenced to five and four years in jail respectively. This will be followed by four and three years of probationary detention or house arrest.

A Hanoi court convicted the lawyers of 'disseminating slanderous and libellous information against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam', after a trial of just four hours. But it was their attempts to promote human rights, and to document abuses, which angered the authorities.

As 7x7 reported on May 1, the official Vietnamese press had previously published articles portraying the pair as criminals. The state news agency accused the lawyers of 'posting information on the internet and painting biased and distorted pictures of the country and its internal affairs'. One paper accused them of 'conspiring with terrorists'.

Dai, 38, who is a member of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam in Hanoi, came to prominence after he defended the so-called Mennonite Six in Ho Chi Minh City in 2004-5. Nhan, 28, who works at Dai's law firm, was preparing to be baptised at the same church.

Both are expected to appeal.

- Pray that Dai and Nhan will be able to appeal against their sentences quickly – and that they will be acquitted. Pray for them and their families in the meantime.
- Pray that this blatant attempt to silence calls for reform will not go unnoticed or unchallenged by governments who have influence over Vietnam's policies.

3. CHINA

The trial of Christian activist Hua Huiqi is likely to come to court imminently – as his mother's health takes a serious turn for the worse in prison.

Hua Huiqi, who was arrested with his mother Shuang Shuying in Beijing's Olympic village in January, is likely to appear before Chaoyang District People's Court very soon – though the charges against him are unknown. He was initially detained for a month pending further investigations, but it is believed he could face up to three years in jail.

Shuang Shuying, who was given a two-year jail term immediately, is said to be 'in a very serious health situation'. She is 76. Doctors have said that a heart problem, diabetes and other complicating factors mean she is too weak to go into a formal prison.

China Aid reports that she is being held in a medical centre, in a one-bedroom flat with two other women prisoners and a 24-hour guard. She was convicted of wilful damage to private property – apparently damaging a car and a touch-screen computer with her walking stick – charges she denies.

Shuang Shuying was apparently jailed to punish her son, Hua Huiqi, who is well-known for his work defending the poor and speaking out against the closure of house churches.

Act

- Write to Shuang Shuying at: Beijing Emergency Treatment Centre, Dewai Qinghe Nanzhen Town, 100085, Beijing, China. Please do not mention Release International in your letter.

Pray

- Pray for the speedy release of Shuang Shuying. Ask God to sustain her.
- Pray that international scrutiny of the trial of Hua Huiqi will lead to his acquittal.

4. ERITREA

Hundreds of Christians from around the world have gathered in Africa to pray for an end to religious persecution in Eritrea.

The event, held in Nairobi, drew together people from Kenya, America, Ethiopia and Israel, some of whom were Eritrean Christians who had been forced to flee their homeland. For more than eight hours, people worshipped and interceded on Eritrea's behalf.

'We are really expecting miracles,' said one key Eritrean leader. 'We are expecting to see the God who answers prayer by fire and to witness divine intervention in our nation.'

The organisers, the Eritrean Evangelical Fellowship in Africa and the Middle East, thanked Christians worldwide who had joined them in the first National Day of Prayer for Eritrea on May 13. About 2,000 Christians are currently detained indefinitely for their faith in Eritrea.

Act:

- Release International and its partners will be taking a stand against religious persecution in Eritrea, with a protest outside the Eritrean embassy in London on Thursday May 31, 3-5pm (96 White Lion Street, N1 9PF – nearest Tube: Angel). Please join us if you can – or pray that our protest will have an impact.

Pray

- Ask for God's mercy on Eritrea. Pray that the nation really will see the 'divine intervention' its church leaders are crying out for. Ask God to sustain the many Christians detained and tortured because they refuse to deny Christ.

Sources: AsiaNews; BBC; China Aid; Christian Solidarity Worldwide; Compass Direct; International Christian Concern; The Jubilee Campaign; The Voice of the Martyrs Canada.

PRISONERS OF FAITH MINISTRY:

Our Prisoners of Faith Ministry provides pastoral care and practical support for Christians imprisoned for their faith. An email alert is sent free monthly, highlighting an individual Christian prisoner, giving prayer points and addresses for letter-writing. To receive these alerts, please contact the office or sign up by visiting our web site: www.releaseinternational.org/prisonersoffaith

Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on Tuesday 12 June 2007.

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.

To stop receiving the prayer alerts or change address, please write to or telephone:

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