

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, January 4, 2011

Prayer support is crucial to those who suffer for their faith in Jesus. Please use these alerts to prompt your own prayers, and to facilitate prayer in your church and other Christian meetings. Please also send it on to other Christians. This information can also be reproduced in church magazines and news bulletins, provided the source is acknowledged.

December 17, 2010: AFGHANISTAN – Jailed Christian denied access to lawyer

Release is calling for prayer for a Christian prisoner of faith who faces a possible death sentence for 'apostasy'.

Said Musa, who has worked for the International Committee of the Red Cross, has been detained in Kabul since May and is said to have suffered torture, abuse and death threats in custody. He has not yet been allowed to consult a lawyer.

Release understands that charges have not yet been brought – but his arrest was reportedly connected with his decision eight years ago to leave Islam and become a Christian.

Said, who has a prosthetic leg, was arrested after video footage showing Afghan Christians being baptised and participating in prayer gatherings was broadcast on national TV. The broadcast triggered protests throughout the country and prompted some – including a deputy leader in Parliament – to call for Christians to be executed.

Said's family were not informed about his whereabouts for two months after his arrest. Release is now encouraging supporters to write polite letters to the Afghan authorities expressing concern about Said's situation.

Another Afghan Christian, 25-year-old Shoib Assadullah, has been in detention since October – after he gave a New Testament to someone who then informed on him to the authorities. Shoib, who became a Christian five years ago, is being held in Mazar-e-Sharif district in northern Afghanistan.

(Source: Release source)

- Pray that Said and Shoib will remain resolute in their faith and know the Lord's comfort, protection and guidance.
- Pray specifically that Said will be granted access to legal counsel. Pray that the cases of both men will be tried quickly and will lead to acquittals.
- Please write a polite letter to President Karzai expressing concern about Said Musa's plight. You can send it via email to: hussain.rahimi@gmail.com or fax it to 020 7581 3452. For a sample letter and more about Said, go to: http://www.releaseinternational.org/media/download_gallery/Prisoners-of-Faith-Alert-December-2010.pdf

December 21, 2010: VIETNAM – Pastors arrested in crackdown on Christians

Vietnamese officials appear to have launched a major crackdown on Christians, calling a halt to Christmas services in several cities and putting pastors under house arrest.

As recently as Sunday (December 19), hundreds of Christians who had come from 10 different provinces for a Christmas celebration at the National Convention Centre in Hanoi found themselves locked out.

When they began to worship outside in the street instead, police moved in and started to strike them with fists and sticks, according to news agency Compass Direct. At least six people were arrested, including Rev Nguyen Huu Bao who was scheduled to speak at the event.

Compass says that similar incidents were reported in at least four other provinces. In Danang city in central Vietnam, officials without a warrant raided one house church and confiscated chairs, the pulpit and the sound system on the morning of a Christmas service. And in Thanh Hoa province, house church Christians were beaten and wounded by police trying to stop their worship.

Release sources say the persecution extends across many provinces in north and central Vietnam. They report that Mennonite pastors in many parts of the Central Highlands were placed under house arrest for three days recently. And in several provinces in north Vietnam, Christians, including pastors, are reported to have been beaten and arrested.

However, a Vietnamese source told Release that churches are not fearful. 'They have a strong faith and are ready to be persecuted,' he said.

Meanwhile, Release has learnt that Mennonite pastor Nguyen Hong Quang has been released from detention in Ho Chi Minh City. Pastor Quang was arrested as officials bulldozed his Bible school last week (*Prayer Alert*, December 14, 2010). There is no news on the 20 Bible college students arrested with Pastor Quang on December 14.

(Sources: Compass Direct, Release International, Voice of the Martyrs Australia)

- Pray God's peace and joy over Christians in Vietnam who are facing persecution as they try to celebrate our Saviour's birth. Pray that the Vietnamese authorities will relent and allow Christmas celebrations to proceed unhindered.
- Thank God for the release of Pastor Quang in Ho Chi Minh City. Ask God to protect him, his family and his Bible college students.

December 23, 2010: IRAQ – Christmas services cancelled due to extremist threat

Many churches in Iraq's major cities have been forced to cancel their Christmas services after extremist websites threatened further attacks.

Religious rights group Middle East Concern reports that many services in Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk have been called off – after threats of violence were posted online on Tuesday for the second time.

Kirkuk's Archbishop Louis Sarko told Agence France-Presse news agency that he and ten other Christians had received threats from a group calling itself the Islamic State of Iraq. This group, which has links with al-Qaeda, has claimed responsibility for the attack on October 31 on Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad in which 53 Christians were killed (*Prayer Alert*, November 3, 2010).

A number of churches have decided not to put up Christmas decorations either. Instead, many are flanked by tall concrete barriers with entrances guarded by security.

The UN estimates that 1,000 Christian families have fled from Baghdad and Mosul to the Kurdish region of northern Iraq since October 31.

Some of the extremist threats online repeated calls for the release of two women in Egypt whom militants insist are being held against their will by Coptic church leaders (*Prayer Alert*, November 24, 2010). Extremists claim the women have converted to Islam. Egyptian church leaders and government officials have repeatedly denied these claims.

(Sources: Agence France-Presse, Middle East Concern, Release International)

- Pray for peace to reign in the hearts of Christians in Iraq who are living in fear of further attack. Stand with them in praying there will be no further violence.

- Pray especially for church leaders. Ask God to grant them wisdom in deciding how best to encourage their congregations and keep them safe.

December 29, 2010: NIGERIA – Scores killed over Christmas in Plateau and Borno

Scores have been killed and injured in a series of bomb blasts and church attacks in Plateau and Borno states in Nigeria.

In Plateau state, in central Nigeria, at least six bombs exploded on Christmas Eve in the Gada Biyu and Uguwar Rukuba districts of the state capital, Jos. The final death toll has yet to be confirmed but reports suggest at least 30 were killed and more than 50 seriously injured.

In Gada Biyu, the bombs were detonated near a church and in places thronging with people doing last-minute Christmas shopping. This is the first time that substantial bombs have been used in terror attacks against civilians in Plateau, according to Agence France-Presse news agency.

Meanwhile, in Maiduguri, Borno state, about 30 attackers armed with knives and petrol bombs raided the Victory Baptist Church in Alemderi, killing Pastor Bulus Marwa and four others, including two choir members in their 20s. The church was then set alight.

At the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN) Church in Sinimari, 60-year-old security guard Philip Sopso was killed when bombs exploded outside the church. A third church, in the Polo area, reported that explosives planted on its property failed to detonate. Twenty-five other people were injured in the Maiduguri raids, according to Compass Direct.

Islamist militant sect *Boko Haram* has since claimed responsibility for the attacks in Maiduguri and Jos, according to Reuters news agency. The sect's avowed aim is to extend Islamic or *Sharia* law across Nigeria and its name means 'Western education is sinful'.

Several sources consider the attacks as an attempt to damage already fragile relations between Muslims and Christians in both states. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has condemned the attacks as 'deplorable'.

Tensions in both areas remain high. Dr Ben Kwashi, Archbishop of Jos, said Christmas celebrations were 'scantily attended' and has urged calm. 'We are a community of hope, a product of hope, sustained by hope in the knowledge that he who saved us is exceedingly abundantly able to deliver from hell, from death, from darkness and from Satan,' he said.

(Sources: Agence France-Presse, BBC, Bloomberg, Compass Direct, Reuters, Stefanos Foundation)

- Ask God to comfort and heal all those who mourn and who are injured. Pray that Christians in Jos and Maiduguri will cling to the hope that is Christ our Saviour.
- Pray that international condemnation of these atrocities will prompt the Nigerian authorities to step up security in Christian communities across the nation.

THANK YOU... for your support and prayers in 2010

At the close of the year, we at Release would like to thank you for your faithful prayers on behalf of persecuted Christians worldwide – and remind you that your prayers are powerful.

There has been no easing of the persecution of our Christian brothers and sisters in many countries in 2010 but we can never measure the impact that our prayers have had in mitigating their potential suffering. Their constant request is for us to pray and we know that through this God comes alongside to strengthen them and give them hope. Sometimes we see more directly that our prayers have been answered, and here are a few examples to encourage you.

Your prayers for Vietnamese pastor and pro-democracy campaigner Nguyen Van Ly were answered on March 15 when he was released from jail on medical grounds – five years early. Pastor Van Ly was sentenced to eight years in 2007 for ‘harming national security’ but suffered a serious stroke in 2009. We pray that he will not be made to serve the rest of his sentence.

In late-March, Pastor Wilson Issavi, leader of the Assyrian Evangelical Church in Karmanshah, Iran, was released on bail after spending almost two months in custody. Reports that he had been tortured in jail (*Prayer Alert, March 2, 2010*) prompted international prayer on his behalf. He still needs our prayers that any charges against him will be dropped.

In May, Iranian prisoners of faith Maryam Rustampoor and Marzieh Esmaeilabad were acquitted, 14 months after their arrest (*Prayer Alert, May 25, 2010*). The two Christians, who were raised as Muslims, had been charged with ‘apostasy’ and ‘propagating Christianity’ – and held for several months in 2009 at Tehran’s notorious Evin prison. Maryam and Marzieh are now safe abroad.

And in August, 25-year-old Rubina Bibi from Punjab in Pakistan was acquitted of blasphemy after a judge ruled that officials had pressured her into making a false confession (*Prayer Alert, August 18, 2010*). Rubina and her infant son were detained for five months after she had an argument with a grocer, prompting locals to accuse her of blasphemy. Rubina and her family have moved from the area, due to the threat of extremist attack.

Your prayers are vital to our ministry – now as much as ever. In April, 14 months of prayer and campaigning on behalf of jailed Christian lawyer Gao Zhisheng apparently paid off as reports that Gao was free began to circulate (*Prayer Alert, April 13, 2010*). Indeed, for two weeks Gao was allowed back to his flat in Beijing and even to his in-laws’ home in Xinjiang province. But, by late-April, Gao had disappeared again and he has not been seen since. His family have fled to the US for their own safety.

Across the world, persecuted Christians in desperate situations need our support: Asia Bibi in Pakistan, sentenced to death for blasphemy in November; churches in Iraq targeted by renewed extremist violence in recent months; and Christian communities in Nigeria’s Plateau state who have suffered attacks this year which have claimed hundreds of lives.

Thank you for standing with us – and with them. We wish you all a very happy Christmas and a peaceful new year.

- Please pray for persecuted Christians around the world for whom Christmas can bring the fear of attack or persecution. Ask God to protect them so they can celebrate Jesus’ birth in freedom and peace.
- Pray particularly for those who are imprisoned and separated from their families at Christmas – for Jesus’ sake. Pray that our Lord, Immanuel, will be with them.