

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, December 7, 2010

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.

November 23, 2010 - IRAQ - Pastor urges Christians to stand firm amid more bloodshed

A pastor at the Baghdad cathedral where 53 Christians were recently killed has urged Iraqi Christians not to give up – even as fresh attacks claim more lives.

Rev Mukhlis Shasha urged his congregation at the Church of Our Lady of Salvation to stand firm during a series of special services this week in the aftermath of the attack on October 31. Fifty-three Christians were killed inside the building, including two priests, when gunmen who had taken them hostage fought with security forces.

‘We may have sadness, but we will not give up,’ Rev Shasha told *The Washington Post*. ‘If we all leave the country, who will remember this massacre? Who will witness the resurrection of this church again?’

His call comes just days after more attacks on Iraq’s dwindling Christian community. On Monday, attackers raided two Christian homes in the al-Tahrir neighbourhood of Mosul, killing the male head of each household. The next day, a Christian man and his six-year-old daughter were killed by a car bomb, also in Mosul. At about the same time, a car bomb was detonated outside a Christian home in the city centre. No one was hurt but the house was badly damaged.

Last week, a spate of bomb and mortar attacks targeted the homes and businesses of Christians in Baghdad, killing at least five Christians and injuring about 33.

An organisation linked with al-Qaeda has since claimed responsibility for the assault on the Baghdad cathedral. Security forces report they have made five arrests in connection with the raid.

(Sources: CNN, Compass Direct, Press TV, *The Telegraph*, *The Washington Post*, VOM Canada)

- Pray God’s perfect peace over Iraqi Christians, especially those who have been personally affected by recent violence. Ask God to strengthen their faith.
- Pray that the Iraqi authorities will do more to protect vulnerable Christians.

NEWS UPDATE

Lawyers for Asia Bibi, the Pakistani Christian sentenced to death last week, have lodged an appeal against the sentence. Asia is the first woman in Pakistan to be given this sentence for blasphemy (*Prayer Alert, November 8, 2010*). The farm labourer was accused of making derogatory remarks about Islam’s prophet, Mohammed, after a discussion about faith with her fellow workers. Asia says that she was not given any opportunity to make a statement in her defence, either before or during her trial. Pray God’s peace over Asia and her family and pray that her appeal will be heard at the earliest opportunity. You can support persecuted Christians in Pakistan by signing Release’s online petition calling for justice on their behalf. Go to www.releaseinternational.org/pages/petition.php

November 25, 2010 - EGYPT - Christians pray for protection amid fear of extremist attacks

Christians in Egypt are calling for prayer amid threats of extremist attack and heightened anti-Christian sentiment.

Months of raised tension between the Coptic community and the Muslim majority have come to a head with the news that extremists who have killed scores of Christians in Iraq in recent weeks may also target believers in Egypt.

Prayer meetings are being held at churches throughout Egypt amid heightened security. In Cairo, the number of security officers standing guard outside churches has doubled. And in Zamalek, visitors to a recent Christmas bazaar and festival at the All Saints Cathedral were met with body searches, metal detectors and sniffer dogs.

Compass Direct news agency reports that the Government has asked pastors to 'cancel unessential, large-scale public meetings'.

President Hosni Mubarak has reportedly made a statement through the state-run MENA news agency promising protection for Copts. 'The President affirmed his extensive solicitude for the protection of the nation's sons, Muslims and Copts, from the forces of terrorism and extremism,' MENA reported.

His promise coincides with much heated debate in the national media over Egypt's 'Coptic heritage' and its 'Islamic identity' – a row which has drawn in influential figures from both the Christian and Muslim communities.

The threat from Islamist militants in Iraq came during the hostage siege at the Church of Our Lady of Salvation in Baghdad on October 31 which ended in the deaths of 53 Christians (*Prayer Alert, November 3, 2010*). The extremists told the media that the assault was in response to allegations that the Coptic church in Egypt was holding against their will two Coptic women who, militants said, had converted to Islam.

Their allegations appear to be based on unfounded rumours surrounding the whereabouts of these women, who had reportedly at some point separated from their husbands, both Coptic priests.

NEWS UPDATE:

Three more Christians have been killed in Iraq this week as a wave of anti-Christian violence continues. US news channel CNN reports that two brothers were killed in the northern city of Mosul when gunmen raided their workplace on Monday. Later that same day, police found an elderly Christian woman strangled at her home in the centre of the city. Please continue to pray God's peace and protection over the church in Iraq.

(Sources: CNN, Compass Direct, MENA)

- Pray that a strengthened faith in God will drive out fear in Egypt's church during these troubled times.
- Thank God for President Mubarak's promise to protect the Copts and pray that he will remain true to his words.

December 2, 2010 - NIGERIA - Three Christians killed in night raid on Jos village

Suspected Fulani militants killed three Christians and injured one other in a night raid on a village near Jos in Plateau state.

The attack on Kwata Zawan last week brings to 540 the number of Christians killed in the Jos area since early March, according to Release partner Stefanos Foundation.

Eyewitnesses told Stefanos Foundation that a band of about ten gunmen dressed in animal-skin jackets and with blackened faces raided Kwata Zawan just after 10pm on November 25. One villager, Sonshak Amos, who ran into the gunmen outside the village, narrowly escaped being attacked with a cutlass and was able to raise the alarm just before the shooting started.

Two men, Iliya Gya and James Gya, were shot dead in their homes, and another, named only as Alfred, was also killed. The village leader Julius Gya, whose brother was among the dead, was shot in the arm.

‘Because we were unarmed, we were so scared to come out,’ villager David Haruna Samson told Stefanos. ‘When everything went calm, we came out and found out that three people were killed.’

Stefanos Foundation, which is supporting survivors, has expressed concern that a nearby military post did not intervene, despite villagers raising the alarm. It is also concerned that perpetrators of other recent attacks on Christian communities have still not been brought to justice.

(Source: Stefanos Foundation)

- Ask God to comfort and strengthen villagers in Kwata Zawan as they come to terms with the violent assault on their community.
- Pray that politicians and military leaders will take resolute steps to protect vulnerable Christian communities in the Jos area, a flashpoint for anti-Christian violence.

December 3, 2010 - EGYPT - Four Copts killed in clashes with security forces over church building

Four Copts were killed and at least 50 were hurt when members of a church in Talbiya, Giza, clashed with security officials trying to stop their building work.

The violence began at 3am on November 24 when nearly 5,000 security officers surrounded a site where a community centre is being built on the property of St Mary’s Church.

This was the security forces’ third attempt to stop construction in less than a fortnight and 200 Copts, including women and children, were keeping a vigil inside the church.

When officers successfully entered the site, both they and members of the church reportedly resorted to violence – but security forces came armed with tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition. Assyrian International News Agency (AINA) reports that members of the public joined security forces in pelting Copts with stones.

Religious rights group Middle East Concern reports that four church members were killed and at least 50 injured, many of them seriously. About 170 Copts have since been charged with offences ranging from attempted murder to not carrying ID papers, according to AINA.

Thirty lawyers reportedly staged a sit-in outside the courts in Giza to protest at not being allowed access to the Copts in detention.

Leaders of St Mary’s Church insist that they do have the required permission for their building work – but the authorities deny this. Religious rights campaigners have seized on this incident to accuse the Egyptian authorities of double standards when it comes to permission for building mosques and churches.

Talking to Reuters news agency, Hossam Bahgat of the Egyptian Institute for Personal Rights said that ‘excessive force’ had been used on people simply asserting their constitutional right to freedom of worship. ‘We have been warning about the Government’s failure to deal with the rising sense of injustice [felt] by the Christian community for a long time,’ he said. ‘This is an extremely disturbing development.’

(Sources: AINA, Middle East Concern, Reuters)

- Please pray God’s comfort and healing over all those bereaved and injured in this incident.
- Pray that this incident will prompt the Egyptian authorities to reflect and make a more conscious effort to accord equal religious rights to all citizens.