

# RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, February 1, 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.*

## **January 14, 2011: NIGERIA – 13 killed in Christian village as religious tensions in Plateau soar**

At least 13 were killed during a series of raids on remote villages in Plateau state – as religious tensions erupted into street violence in several towns.

Release partners have confirmed that armed attacks were made on several villages in the Barkin Ladi and Riyom areas of Plateau, central Nigeria, on Monday. Hardest hit was Wereng village in Riyom where 13 people died, mainly women and children. The BBC reports that victims bore machete and gunshot wounds.

Religious rights group Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has alleged possible military collusion in the attack. It reports eyewitnesses saying that the attackers included men in military uniform and says that Wereng villagers had found ID papers and a bank book belonging to a member of the Joint Task Force charged with peace-keeping in Plateau.

These attacks occurred against a backdrop of mounting tensions between Christians and Muslims in Plateau and particularly its capital, Jos. The already charged atmosphere was aggravated by bomb attacks in Christian districts of Jos on Christmas Eve (*Prayer Alert, December 29, 2010*) and a recent attack on a vehicle in Jos in which seven Muslim passengers died.

At least 11 people died in clashes on the streets of the state capital last weekend, according to the BBC. Jos was described as a 'ghost town' this week as residents stayed in their homes for fear of further violence, and banks, schools and shops remained shut. The Government has reportedly drafted in 1,500 extra police in a bid to contain the violence.

CSW reports that violence spread over the weekend to other towns south of Jos such as Anglo Jos and Bukuru.

(Sources: Agence France-Presse, BBC, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Stefanos Foundation)

- Pray for survivors and the bereaved in the villages in Plateau attacked this week. Pray too for Release partners trying to offer support and comfort.
- Pray for order and peace to be restored to this region. Pray particularly that lack of confidence in security forces will not tempt Christians to retaliate.

### **Update:**

Christians in Egypt report that services celebrating the Coptic Christmas on January 6-7 passed without incident, amid tight security. Moderate Muslims are reported to have turned out in their thousands to attend Coptic services and hold vigils outside churches, offering themselves as 'human shields' in the name of religious tolerance.

On Tuesday, however, a Christian man was shot dead and six other Christians were injured on a train in Minya province, south of Cairo. Their attacker reportedly shouted an Islamic slogan before firing.

Continue to pray God's peace and protection over Coptic Christians in Egypt. Thank God for the show of support from so many moderate Muslims – and pray that their calls for religious tolerance and freedom will have an impact. (Sources: Middle East Concern, VOM Canada, Watani)

## **January 18, 2011: SOMALIA – Christian mother-of-four murdered by extremists**

Islamist extremists in Somalia murdered a mother-of-four in front of her community after tapping her phone for proof that she had become a Christian.

*Al Shabaab* militants arrested Asha Mberwa at her home in Warbhigly village on the outskirts of Mogadishu on January 7 – and cut her throat in front of villagers the following day.

One of Asha's relatives, who spoke to Compass Direct news agency on condition of anonymity, said he believed *al Shabaab* had monitored calls between him and Asha on January 5.

He said he presumed that the militants had been able to confirm she had become a Christian through their conversation. He was trying to make arrangements for her family to leave the area.

Asha, who was 36, had been receiving threatening messages for some time, he said.

Asha's four children – who are aged between four and 12 – are being cared for but are said to be very distressed. Their father, Abdinazir Mohammed Hassan, who was not at home at the time of his wife's murder, has reportedly fled and gone into hiding.

*Al Shabaab* insurgents control much of southern and central Somalia and are trying to impose strict *Sharia* (Islamic law) across the country. The transitional Government in Mogadishu has also embraced a version of *Sharia* which makes apostasy – leaving Islam – a capital offence.

(Source: Compass Direct)

- Pray God's perfect peace, healing, comfort and protection over Asha's family.
- Continue to pray for the church in Somalia, which has been forced underground by both government policy and extremists' threats. Ask God to build Somali Christians' faith and multiply their number, for His glory.

## **January 20, 2011: ERITREA – Scores of Christians arrested in major crackdown**

Eritrean Christians' fears of a mass crackdown by officials appear to have been realised – with scores of arrests reported in the past three weeks.

More than 100 Christians have been detained since December 30 in raids on churches in or near the capital, Asmara, and in the town of Nakfa in eastern Eritrea. In one case, the entire congregation was taken in for questioning, according to religious rights charity Open Doors.

Eritrean Christians have been bracing themselves for a major crackdown for some time. Selam Kidane, director of Release Eritrea, predicted an escalation in persecution in her address to Release International's conference on November 6, 2010.

The Eritrean church has been further shaken by the news that yet another Christian has died in custody. Seble Hagos Mebrahtu, who was 27, died at the Sawa military camp on January 1 – apparently because she was refused medical treatment for malaria. She is also reported to have been tortured – after being found reading a Bible at her home. Her death brings to 16 the total number of Christians known to have died in custody since 2002.

The Eritrean authorities' ongoing campaign against Christians certainly appears to have escalated in recent weeks.

Open Doors reports that the entire congregation of the Philadelphia Church in Asmara – all 41 members present – were arrested on December 31. They were taken to a police station and beaten. And a further 35 believers, including two elderly men in poor health, were arrested on January 9 in Nakfa, during a worship meeting at a private address. It is not yet known whether these believers have been released.

Meanwhile, on January 1, 27 Christians belonging to various churches near the Eritrean capital were taken into custody and are reportedly still being held by police.

(Source: Open Doors)

- Ask God to sustain and comfort the friends and family of Seble Hagos Mebrahtu, who died in custody earlier this month.
- Pray for the immediate release of all 103 Christians known to have been arrested since December 30. Pray that their time in custody will not be in vain but will sow seeds of faith among their fellow inmates and prison guards.

### **January 26, 2011: NIGERIA – Further deaths as Plateau violence continues**

Midnight raids on two villages in Plateau state are reported to have claimed the lives of eight people, amid continuing religious tension in central Nigeria.

Sources report that the victims, who included a woman and her daughter, were killed in the villages of Farin Lamba and Fan, which are in the Riyom and Barkin Ladi local government areas respectively.

This is the fifth recorded attack on Christian villages in this area in a fortnight. *Prayer Alert* reported on January 14 that at least 13 people were killed during raids on several remote villages in the area earlier this month.

According to sources, many women recently joined a protest in Vom in Jos South local government area, demanding the removal of the Special Task Force charged with keeping peace in the area. This force is facing mounting allegations that it is either turning a blind eye to attacks on Christian communities or may even be complicit in them (*Prayer Alert, January 14, 2011*).

Meanwhile, Reuters news agency reports that a soldier guarding a church in Maiduguri, Borno state, was shot dead at his post on Sunday. This incident follows bomb attacks on three churches in the city last month. (*Prayer Alert, December 29, 2010*).

(Sources: AllAfrica.com, Middle East Concern, Reuters)

- Pray for an end to the cycle of violence that continues to claim lives in Plateau state. Pray particularly that officials will do more to ensure that effective security measures are in place to avert further bloodshed.
- Pray for survivors of violent attacks on Egyptian churches, for whom painful memories will be revived by the recent court ruling in the Nag Hammadi case.

### **NEWS UPDATE:**

**An Egyptian court has convicted three men of involvement in the attack on a Coptic church in Nag Hammadi on January 6, 2010, in which six Christians and a Muslim security guard were killed. One man, found guilty of firing in the drive-by shooting, was given the death sentence for murder. The sentences for his co-defendants are due to be announced next month. Please continue to pray for an easing in the religious tension that has followed the Alexandria church bombing on January 1 this year, in which 23 people were killed. (Source: *Middle East Concern*)**