

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, May 10, 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.

April 26, 2011: PAKISTAN – Christians held after blasphemy riots

Two Christians from Punjab are in protective custody after blasphemy accusations against them sparked violent riots.

A furious mob began attacking Christian homes in Aziz Colony, Gujranwala, after a father and son accused of burning the Koran were released by police.

Police said they had no option but to re-arrest Pastor Mushtaq Gill and his son, Farrukh, to avert further violence, according to Release partner CLAAS (Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement).

The attacks, on April 15, prompted hundreds of Christians in the area to flee their homes, fearing a repeat of the attack on Gojra, also in Punjab, in August 2009. Seven Christians were killed in the Gojra raid, which was also prompted by blasphemy allegations.

Pastor Mushtaq is a teacher at the Christian Technical Training Centre of Gujranwala; Farrukh works for a bank. CLAAS reports that the pair were falsely accused about four months ago when burnt pages of the Koran were found near their house.

Since the riots, the police have charged the pair under Pakistan's blasphemy laws and are holding them at an undisclosed location. Compass Direct news service quotes police as saying that a case was registered for the Christians' own safety.

CLAAS reports that the situation in the area remains tense.

Meanwhile, CLAAS is also calling for prayer for a pastor and his wife from Hamza Town, near Lahore, who have gone into hiding after death threats.

Pastor Ashraf Paul, 55, and his wife, Rubina, received a five-page letter from extremists threatening to kill them unless a substantial sum of money was handed over.

News Update:

Afghan Christian Shoib Assadullah, who was detained in October, has been released from jail and has left Afghanistan. Shoib, who became a Christian five years ago, was arrested in northern Afghanistan after giving a New Testament to someone who then informed on him to the authorities (Prayer Alert, December 17, 2010).

(Sources: CLAAS, Compass Direct, Release sources)

- x Pray that calm will be restored in Aziz Colony in Gujranwala and the allegations against Pastor Mushtaq and Farrukh will be exposed as false. And continue to pray for the CLAAS team and its director, Joseph Francis, who have faced threats themselves as they work to uphold Christians' religious rights.
- x Thank God for the release of Shoib Assadullah in Afghanistan. Pray that Shoib will know God's guidance and provision as he rebuilds his life abroad.

April 28, 2011: NIGERIA – Christians ‘targeted’ in post-election violence

More than 500 people have been killed and thousands displaced in post-election violence which has swept across northern Nigeria.

At the same time 60 churches were burnt and thousands of Christian homes destroyed in protest at the electoral victory of southern Christian Goodluck Jonathan, reports religious rights charity Open Doors. Muslims were then ‘targeted in revenge attacks’, according to the BBC.

The Red Cross said that 16,000 people had been displaced across six states in the predominantly Muslim north of the country.

Release partner Stefanos Foundation said that it had had word from the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in Kano state to say that Christian leaders were struggling to cope with the high number of homeless people in need of help. It also reported that CAN in Bauchi state had said that Christians had taken refuge at police barracks, after receiving threats.

Opposition leader Muhammadu Buhari confirmed to the BBC that churches were being burnt – but denied that the violence was religiously motivated.

However, Stefanos Foundation pointed out that the Nigeria Muslim Council issued an ultimatum on April 6, demanding Christians leave the north of the country within the week. Stefanos appealed for prayer for Nigeria’s Christians amid ongoing unrest.

Most of the violence so far has occurred in the northern state of Kaduna. In one rural town there, Zonkwa, more than 300 people died, according to the BBC.

Violence broke out on Monday, April 18, after the preliminary results of the presidential poll were announced. Supporters of opposition leader Buhari claimed the vote was rigged – though international monitors declared the poll to be free and fair.

Many in the north believed the next president should come from their region because the last Muslim president, Umaru Yar’Adua, died in 2010 before he had finished his term. President Jonathan won 57 per cent of the votes.

News update:

Release has renewed its call for urgent prayer for Pakistani pastor Ashraf Paul and his family from Hamza Town near Lahore (Prayer Alert, April 26, 2011) – after their son was attacked yesterday. Sarfraz Ashraf Paul received bullet wounds to the face in the attack, according to Release partner CLAAS. We reported on Tuesday that the family had received death threats from Islamist extremists and had gone into hiding.

(Sources: BBC, CLAAS, Fox News, International Christian Concern, Open Doors, Stefanos Foundation)

- x Pray that peace and order will be restored in northern states of Nigeria. Pray that the election result will be accepted by all and that God will guide President Goodluck Jonathan and other Christians in positions of power.
- x Continue to ask God to protect Pastor Ashraf Paul and his family in Pakistan.

May 5, 2011: PAKISTAN – Christians on high alert after bin Laden death

Christians in Pakistan are said to be on high alert after news of Osama bin Laden’s death triggered extremist threats against their community.

An Islamic radical group calling itself Pakistan’s Taliban issued a statement threatening retaliatory attacks on Christians after the al-Qaeda leader’s killing at the hands of US troops.

The Anglican Bishop of Gojra, John Samuel, said Christians were 'very apprehensive' of attack – because of the perception widely held in Pakistan that Christianity is a Western religion. Gojra, in Punjab, was the scene of a brutal extremist attack in August 2009 which claimed the lives of seven Christians.

In fact, even before bin Laden's death was announced Christians in another part of Punjab, near Gujranwala, were under siege for the second time in a fortnight.

Hundreds of angry Muslims attacked Christian homes, a school and a Presbyterian church building in Aziz Colony after learning that police had released two Christians accused of blasphemy.

Pastor Mushtaq Gill and his son Farrukh were freed after a handwriting expert hired by police ruled out their involvement in an alleged blasphemy involving the burning of a Koran. They were first arrested some four months ago.

Further allegations of Koran burning surfaced in Aziz immediately after the father and son were released.

In fact, this is the second time the Christian men were released by police officers. A mob attacked Christian properties in the same community on April 15 when police first tried to release the pair (Prayer Alert, April 26, 2011). Pastor Mushtaq and Farrukh were immediately taken back into protective custody after the first riot. The men are now said to be in hiding with their families.

News Update:

Three of the four Christians arrested in Hamedan, Iran, last year have been released after a court hearing – but one of them remains in custody. The two couples – Pastor Vahik Abrahamian and his wife Sonia Keshish-Avanesian, together with Arash Kermanjani and his wife Arezo Teymouri – were taken into custody on September 4. The release of all but Pastor Vahik on April 30 followed a court hearing at which the four Christians and their lawyers were allowed to present their defence. It is not yet clear whether charges against them have been dropped – and it is not known why Pastor Vahik has not been freed. Sonia is said to have suffered a miscarriage during her ordeal (Prayer Alert, March 1, 2011) . The three Christians who have been released are said to be very weak.

(Sources: Compass Direct, Farsi Christian News Network, International Christian Concern, Middle East Concern, The Telegraph)

- x Pray God's protection over Pastor Mushtaq and his son, Farrukh, and the rest of their family in Pakistan – as well as over all other Christians in Aziz Colony, Gujranwala. Pray that moderate Christians will accept the police findings eliminating the Christian men from their inquiry into the alleged blasphemy.
- x Thank God for the release of the three Christians from Hamedan, Iran, and ask Him to restore them to full health. Pray for the immediate release of Pastor Vahik.