

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, February 15, 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 28, 2011: UZBEKISTAN – Pastor released after serving four-year jail term.

Uzbek pastor Dmitry Shestakov was released from jail four years after his arrest – and three days before his mother's death.

Pastor Dmitry (also known as David) was released from the prison in Andijan on January 21.

Religious rights group Open Doors has confirmed that Dmitry was able to see his mother before her death. He is said to be in good spirits – but suffering from heart and liver problems and high blood pressure.

Pastor Dmitry, who is part of the legally registered Full Gospel Church in Andijan, was arrested on January 21, 2007, over 'illegal religious activities'. In March that year, he was charged under criminal law and sentenced to four years in Navoi labour camp, about 500 miles away from his home.

His wife, Marina, and his three daughters, Masha, Sasha and Vera, were able to visit him in prison several times a year. Release and its partners have given support to Dmitry's family since his arrest. Release visited them in December 2008 and encouraged supporters to write to the Shestakovs.

'I am overwhelmed with joy because of all the attention I received after I was released,' said Dmitry. 'I wish to thank all my brothers and sisters who have prayed for me and who have thought about me while I was imprisoned.'

Open Doors reports that Dmitry still faces severe restrictions. His movements will be closely monitored and he has to report to the police every month.

Dmitry has been warned by the Andijan judiciary not to commit any further religious crimes. 'I have been ordered to follow strict guidelines and regulations,' said Dmitry. 'I am a pastor and I want to serve God but I have to find a wise way to do this.'

Christians in Uzbekistan have been facing increased persecution since 2008, both from the Muslim community and the nation's authoritarian regime.

OTHER NEWS:

Pakistani Christian Aleem Masih has been freed on appeal, after serving more than nine years in jail for alleged murder. Aleem, from Kasur in Punjab, was arrested in 2001 after being falsely implicated in a murder case following a land dispute, according to Release partner Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan (SLMP). SLMP has been providing Aleem and his family with practical and spiritual support.

(Sources: Open Doors, Release International, Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan)

- Pray for Pastor Dmitry and his family as they rebuild their lives together. Stand with Pastor Dmitry in asking God to guide him and grant him wisdom in knowing how best to continue his ministry.
- Thank God for the release of Aleem Masih. Ask God to protect him and his family and to prosper them.

February 1, 2011: NIGERIA – Release partners under intense pressure amid sectarian violence.

Release is calling on supporters to pray for its partners trying to support Christians caught up in ongoing sectarian violence in central Nigeria.

Release partners report that at least 24 Christians have been killed in targeted attacks around Jos, Plateau state, since Thursday – as sectarian rioting in the Jos area and parts of Bauchi state continues to claim lives.

At least six people were killed in a raid on Dorowa village in the Barkin Ladi area near Jos on Thursday and 18 others died in neighbouring Christian villages, Release partners report. More than 30 homes in Dorowa were burnt down.

Religious rights group Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) reports that six villages in total in Barkin Ladi were attacked on January 27.

Meanwhile, sectarian violence continues in several parts of central Nigeria. In Tafawa Balewa, Bauchi state, 35 people died in clashes on Thursday, police reportedly told news agency Agence France-Presse. Arson attacks in the town reportedly destroyed five mosques and 50 houses. An unexploded bomb was found and defused in a Methodist church in Bauchi city yesterday.

This weekend, the Plateau state capital, Jos, witnessed rioting in which churches, mosques and homes were set ablaze.

Release partners and Christian leaders in the region continue to call on officials to ensure that the Joint Task Force charged with peacekeeping in the region becomes more proactive in protecting vulnerable Christian communities.

Christians in the city of Maiduguri in Borno state, north-east Nigeria, are also fearful after Islamist sect *Boko Haram* murdered governorship candidate Modu Fannami Gubio and five others last Friday.

(Sources: Agence France-Presse; Bloomberg; Christian Solidarity Worldwide; Stefanos Foundation; *The Nation*, Nigeria)

- Pray God's perfect peace to rest over Christians in areas of central and north-east Nigeria affected by sectarian conflict or Islamist extremism.
- Continue to pray specifically that Christians will not be tempted to retaliate.
- Pray particularly for Release partners in the area, who are under immense pressure trying to support affected Christian communities.

February 4, 2011: EGYPT – Christians fear for the future amid political unrest.

Many Egyptian Christians are reported to be confined to their homes, in fear of where the current political instability may lead.

While some Christians are believed to have joined the protests, Release partners say numbers of evangelicals have been too afraid to leave their homes since protesters demanding President Mubarak's resignation took to the streets of Cairo.

A Release partner who supports Christians in Egypt said that evangelicals he knew were 'isolated, afraid and in great need, being confined in their homes for almost two weeks now.'

Some Egyptians are hopeful that the current instability will pave the way for greater democracy and religious tolerance.

Indeed, religious rights group Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports that some protesters appear to be putting aside religious differences and chanting 'Muslims and Christians are all Egyptians'.

However, there is fear that extremist elements may fill the political void if President Mubarak leaves office.

(Sources: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, International Christian Concern, Release partners)

- Pray that Christians in Egypt will find peace and strength in knowing that God rules and reigns over all the earth.
- Pray for a swift and just solution to the current political crisis in Egypt which will usher in an era of greater freedom including religious liberty.

February 9, 2011: INDONESIA – Mob angered by court sentence attacks churches.

Thousands of Islamic hardliners rioted in Central Java after a judge ignored their demands for the death sentence for a Christian convicted of blasphemy.

The violence broke out in Temanggung yesterday when a court sentenced Richmond Bawengan Antonius to five years in jail for distributing evangelical tracts in the area last October. The tracts 'poked fun' at Islamic symbols, according to online news agency AsiaNews.

Angry Muslims reportedly stormed the court building at about 10am, attacking Antonius and threatening the judge who had to be rescued from the building.

In the riots that followed, the court house windows were smashed; then several Christian buildings were attacked.

The Church of St Peter and Paul was pelted with stones and its leader, Pastor Saldhana, was reported to be badly beaten. Release sources report that the Indonesia Bethel Church and the Temanggung Pentecost Church were both set alight. Part of a children's nursery inside the Indonesia Bethel Church compound was also damaged.

A church-run orphanage and health centre were reportedly destroyed in the violence, which only ended when hundreds of police in riot gear intervened.

'The situation in Temanggung city has been dreadful,' said a Release source, adding that businesses had been forced to close and traffic was in chaos.

(Sources: AsiaNews, Release sources)

- Pray for calm and peace to be restored in Temanggung, Central Java. Pray particularly for the congregations and Christian workers affected by the violence.
- Ask God to protect Richmond Bawengan Antonius and his family from extremists disgruntled by what they perceive as a lenient sentence.