

# RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, March 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.*

## **March 1, 2011: IRAN – Concern rises for two Christian couples jailed since September**

Release contacts say they are increasingly concerned for two Christian couples imprisoned in Iran and are calling for prayer and advocacy on their behalf.

Pastor Vahik Abrahamian and his wife Sonia Keshish-Avanesian were with their friends, Arash Kermanjani and his wife Arezo Teymouri, when all four were detained on September 4.

The two couples, who are close friends, were arrested at the Abrahamians' home in Hamadan, west Iran, and taken initially to the Ministry of Islamic Guidance prison.

For the first 40 days, they were held in solitary confinement and reportedly suffered physical abuse and psychological pressure. Pastor's wife Sonia, who was pregnant when she was arrested, is said to have suffered a miscarriage – her fourth.

The couples, who are now being held in Hamadan prison, are reported to have been accused of various offences, including propagating Christianity, opposing the Islamic Republic of Iran, and having contact with exiled opposition figures.

Release contacts have expressed concern about the couples' well-being – and about their prospects for justice. They are now asking Christians in the West to write polite letters of concern to the Iranian authorities, asking for their immediate release.

Pressure on Iranian house churches appears to have increased since Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, branded home-based churches a new threat to the regime in a speech last October.

(Sources: Release contacts)

### **Pray**

- Pray for the immediate release of these four Christians from Hamadan. Ask God to comfort and heal them after their ordeal – and bless their ministry.
- Pray for a change of heart among Iranian officials who appear to equate home-based churches with a threat to national security.

### **Act**

- Read more about Vahik, Sonia, Arash and Arezo's case in our February 2011 *Prisoners of Faith Alert* at:  
[http://www.releaseinternational.org/media/download\\_gallery/Prisoners%20of%20Faith%20Alert%20February%202011.pdf](http://www.releaseinternational.org/media/download_gallery/Prisoners%20of%20Faith%20Alert%20February%202011.pdf)
- Write a polite letter of concern to the Iranian authorities, asking for the four Christians' release. A sample letter and contact details for the Ayatollah Khamenei are given in the *Prisoners Of Faith Alert* (see above). **Please do not mention Release International in your letter.** If you have already written one letter, please consider writing another to any of the following:

- **The Prison Warden**, Hamadan Central Prison, Tehran/Hamadan road, 5th km to Hamadan, Voroudi Bahram Abad, Islamic Republic of Iran.
  - **His Excellency Ayatollah Heydar Moslehi**, Ministry of Justice, Panzdah-Khordad Square, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran.
  - **His Excellency President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**, The Presidency, Palestine Avenue, Azerbaijan Intersection, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran.
- Subscribe today for free to Release's *Prisoners Of Faith Alerts* at: [www.releaseinternational.org/pages/contact-form.php](http://www.releaseinternational.org/pages/contact-form.php)

### **March 2, 2011: PAKISTAN – Christian cabinet member and minorities' champion assassinated**

The only Christian in Pakistan's cabinet and a vocal critic of the country's blasphemy laws was assassinated today in Islamabad.

Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, a strong advocate for Christians' rights, was shot dead in his car as he pulled out of the driveway at his parents' home, according to the Associated Press news agency.

Pamphlets found at the scene attributed the killing to al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban and said Mr Bhatti had been targeted for his faith and because of his involvement in 'a committee reviewing the blasphemy laws'. The Pakistani Government has repeatedly insisted no such committee exists.

Eyewitnesses said gunmen opened fire on Mr Bhatti's car before fleeing the scene. Mr Bhatti, 42, had no bodyguards with him at the time.

Bhatti's death comes just weeks after the assassination of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, killed for his high-profile opposition to the blasphemy laws (*Prayer Alert, January 12, 2011*). He, like Mr Bhatti, had publicly spoken out about the death sentence given in November to Asia Bibi, a Punjab mother-of-five convicted of blasphemy.

Shahbaz Bhatti was one of the founding members of the organisation All Pakistan Minorities Alliance in 1985 and was widely considered a champion of religious minorities in Pakistan. Government officials immediately condemned Mr Bhatti's murder, denouncing militancy.

A close friend of Mr Bhatti told Release that he was 'heartbroken' by the news. He also spoke of his frustration at the lack of government protection for the Christian community in Pakistan.

'When a government minister is not secure, what is the position of Christians?' he told Release. 'We are like sheep – extremists can come and slaughter us. The Government is not taking seriously its responsibility to protect the Christian community. You see some policemen outside churches on Sunday. But they are not enough. We need justice.'

Release CEO Andy Dipper paid tribute to Mr Bhatti and called on Christians to pray for his family – and his attackers. He said: 'Shahbaz was an uncompromising supporter of minorities in Pakistan who face abuse and unfair treatment. He was fully aware of the risks in speaking out. Extremists have succeeded in destroying another good man.'

(Sources: Associated Press, BBC, *Dawn* online, *The Guardian*)

- Ask God to comfort and protect Shahbaz Bhatti's family. Pray they will have a deeper revelation of God as their father and saviour through their grief. Pray God's protection over Release partners, who champion minorities' rights.

- Pray for Mr Bhatti's attackers, that they will repent and come to know the love of Jesus. Pray too that the Pakistani authorities will take a tough stand against extremism and take up Mr Bhatti's mantle in promoting tolerance and equality for all.

### **March 7, 2011: INDIA – Remote villagers in fear after series of raids**

Villagers in remote areas of Orissa say they fear a fresh outbreak of widespread violence against Christians – after a series of extremist attacks.

Ethnic minority Koya Christians say Hindu extremists have attacked their villages in Malkangiri district, east India, at least 15 times since early December – and they fear worse is to come.

Churches and Christians have been attacked – including children and women, some of them pregnant. Even midnight prayer meetings have been raided and participants beaten. Some Christians have fled the area for fear of further attacks.

In the latest incident, about 60 extremists raided the village of Murliguda, beating one Christian unconscious and damaging the eardrums of another.

One of the worst raids was on Christmas Day, when about 200 extremists burst into a church in Koyi Konda, seriously injuring several Christians and wrecking furniture. The homes and crops of about ten Christians were also destroyed.

Christian leaders in the area say they fear that police inaction in response to villagers' complaints may have spurred on extremists to make further attacks.

The Malkangiri District Christian Forum is reported as claiming that extremists have forcibly converted about 25 people to Hinduism in the Mottu area.

The Forum has been lobbying police and district and state officials demanding greater protection for Christians – to avoid a repeat of 2008, when extremists launched a widespread campaign of violence against Christians across Orissa, and particularly in Kandhamal district.

Compass Direct news agency notes that some Christians are concerned that a group of officials from Kandhamal district have been transferred to Malkangiri.

#### **News update:**

Release contacts say the case of Afghan Christian Shoib Assadullah is due in court again this week. Shoib, who is in his mid-20s, has been detained since October – after he gave a New Testament to someone who then informed on him to the authorities. Shoib is concerned about new management at his prison and what that might result in. Fellow Christian Said Musa was released from jail in Afghanistan last month – after being detained for almost nine months on charges of 'apostasy' (*Prisoners Of Faith Alert, March 2011*).

(Sources: Compass Direct, Release sources)

- Pray for ethnic minority Koya Christians in Orissa. Ask God to protect them – and pray that district and state officials will play their part in defending these vulnerable communities.
- Pray for Shoib Assadullah's safety and for his swift acquittal. Pray that Shoib, who became a Christian about five years ago, will stand firm in his faith.

## **March 9, 2011: ETHIOPIA – Blasphemy cry triggers mob rampage**

At least one Christian was killed and 59 churches were burnt when a huge Islamist mob rampaged through part of west Ethiopia in response to blasphemy allegations.

The violence, which is reported to be ongoing, began last Wednesday after a Christian in the Jimma area was accused of tearing up a copy of the Koran, Islam's holy book.

Thousands of Islamist extremists began attacking Christians and their property in Asendabo – and the violence spread to Chiltie, Gilgel Gibe, Gibe, Nada, Dimtu, Uragay, Busa and Koticha. Local Christians fear that the violence, which began in rural areas of the Oromia region, could spread to Jimma town.

More than 4,000 Christians have fled their homes, according to Compass Direct news agency.

Local church leaders say that the authorities are not doing enough to curb the violence or protect Christian communities: security forces sent in to try to quell the riots were repelled by the mob.

The Christian who was killed has not been named but is believed to have been a member of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Several others are reported to have been injured. The precise number of casualties is unclear as sources have not yet been able to enter the area because of security fears.

Compass Direct reports that, in addition to damage to 59 churches of all denominations, at least 28 homes, a Bible college and two church offices were attacked. The damage so far is reportedly estimated to stand at about 60 million birr (£2.2 million).

Although Ethiopia is a mainly Christian nation, Christians are said to suffer harassment and discrimination in predominantly Muslim areas, which include Jimma town.

Meanwhile, the Ethiopian authorities are said to be engaged in trying to repel Islamist extremist *al-Shabaab* militia from Somalia at its border with Kenya. *Al-Shabaab* has killed at least 24 Christians in Somalia since 2009 in an effort to extend its own strict version of *Sharia* across the country.

(Sources: BBC, Compass Direct, International Christian Concern, US Department of State – 2010 International Religious Freedom Report)

- Ask God to bless and comfort those who have been bereaved or injured in this recent violence.
- Pray that the Ethiopian authorities will take a firm stand against extremism in the name of religious tolerance.