

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, January 18, 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.

December 30, 2010: SUDAN – Tensions rise in run-up to vote on independence for south

Release is calling for prayer for Sudan in the run-up to next month's referendum on whether or not South Sudan should become independent.

Tensions between North and South Sudan have been building for months in advance of the ballot in the south on January 9, 2011, in which a vote for independence is widely expected.

President Omar al-Bashir raised the stakes recently by announcing that the north of the country will come under strict Islamic law (*Sharia*) if the south secedes. This news alarmed southerners living in the north, who are currently protected from some of the stronger aspects of *Sharia*.

The referendum was a condition of the 2005 north-south peace deal which ended decades of civil war between the Arab and Muslim north of the country and the mainly Christian and animist south.

About 250,000 southerners living in the north have registered to come back, according to news agency IRIN – and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees says that nearly 55,000 have already travelled home to vote.

Southern leader Salva Kiir has given warning of a 'humanitarian crisis' facing South Sudan, whose poverty makes it ill-equipped to deal with the influx.

He also said that anti-southern hate crimes in North Sudan have risen recently as a reaction to the forthcoming referendum, according to news agency PR Newswire.

Many elements of the north-south peace accord remain unresolved. Of particular concern is the thorny issue of Abyei province, an oil-rich area which straddles the current north-south border. It was also due to hold a referendum on January 9 on whether it should remain a semi-autonomous region within North Sudan or become part of the south – but preparations for this ballot are woefully behind schedule. Middle East Concern, a religious rights group, reports that southerners fear that instability in Abyei could reignite widespread north-south conflict. Misseriya Arabs, a tribal group loyal to President al-Bashir, claimed that they would assume authority in Abyei on December 25 this year. South Sudan does not recognise this group as even eligible to vote in the Abyei referendum.

(Sources: BBC, Middle East Concern, PR Newswire, Reuters, *The New York Times*, UNHCR)

- Pray that tensions between North and South Sudan do not escalate in the run-up to the ballot on January 9. Pray particularly for Christians living in North Sudan who fear increased persecution from those opposed to the referendum.
- Pray that whatever the outcome of the referendum, southerners' democratic right to decide their future will be upheld. Pray that politicians on all sides will remain committed to peace in this divided country.

January 04, 2011: EGYPT and IRAQ – Brutal bomb attacks usher in New Year

Bomb attacks on Christians in Egypt and Iraq have claimed several lives over the New Year.

At least 21 people were killed and 79 injured when a bomb went off outside the Church of the Two Saints in Alexandria in the early hours of January 1.

Meanwhile, in Baghdad, at least two Christians died and 13 were hurt in a series of bomb attacks targeting Christians in the Iraqi capital on December 30.

Worshippers at the Coptic Church of the Two Saints in Alexandria were leaving a midnight service celebrating the New Year when a suspected suicide bomber detonated explosives. As well as claiming lives, the blast caused extensive damage to the church and a nearby mosque. Eight Muslims were among the injured.

The apparently co-ordinated attacks in Baghdad on December 30 were all targeted at Christian homes in Christian neighbourhoods. In one incident, attackers left a bomb on a doorstep in the Ghadir district, rang the bell, then fled. Elderly couple Fawzi Rahim, 76, and his 78-year-old wife, Janet Mekha, were killed instantly when they opened the door.

Police confirmed to Associated Press news agency that six other homes in Baghdad were targeted by bombs, stun grenades or rockets.

So far no one has claimed responsibility for the attacks in either Iraq or Egypt but commentators have noted earlier threats by militants in Iraq to attack Christians in both countries (*Prayer Alert, November 24, 2010*). These militants accuse the Coptic church in Egypt of abducting three women who, militants say, have converted to Islam. The Coptic church denies the allegation.

The attack in Alexandria, Egypt, triggered clashes between local Christians and Muslims and police had to use tear gas to disperse the crowds. However, on Sunday morning in Cairo, hundreds of Muslims and Christians came together in a demonstration condemning the bomb attack and showing solidarity with the Copts. Christians and Muslims also joined a similar protest in Alexandria, close to the scene of the attack.

At the Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad, where more than 50 Christians were killed in a siege in October, Muslims and Christians assembled on New Year's Eve to watch a play about a woman whose son was killed in the attack.

(Sources: Associated Press, *Los Angeles Times*, Middle East Concern)

- Ask God to comfort and heal all those who have been wounded or bereaved in these brutal attacks. Pray that Christians in Egypt and Iraq will be encouraged to see God at work in their hearts and in their communities.
- Continue to pray that the authorities in Iraq and Egypt will step up security to protect vulnerable Christian communities from targeted attacks.

January 06, 2011: IRAN – Christians hit by fresh wave of arrests

Christians in Iran are concerned by a recent wave of arrests targeting their community – and by officials' threats of more to follow.

Religious rights group Middle East Concern (MEC) reports that arrests have been made in Tehran and various other cities in a crackdown which began over Christmas.

Sources confirm that 25 Christians with a Muslim background – including church leaders and five married couples – were arrested at their homes in several cities. Two couples were separated from very young children.

In most cases, armed security officials entered homes by force, abused the Christians physically and verbally, handcuffed them and then took them away for questioning.

MEC reports that 14 of the 25 are still in detention. The 11 others were reportedly interrogated and forced to sign statements declaring they would no longer participate in Christian activities before being released.

There are reports of other arrests, though the precise numbers involved are not yet clear. Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports that 50 others have been detained.

The Governor General of Tehran province, Morteza Tamaddon, confirmed in a statement on Tuesday that a number of evangelical Christians had been arrested. He referred to them as a 'corrupt' influence and gave warning that further arrests were imminent.

'Just like the Taliban... who have inserted themselves into Islam like a parasite, they have crafted a movement with Britain's backing in the name of Christianity,' he told the state-run news agency, IRNA.

Christianity is among the religions officially recognised in Iran but officials appear to be targeting the house church movement and believers with a Muslim background. Under Iran's *Sharia*-based law, apostasy – renouncing Islam – is punishable by death.

(Sources: AFP, IRNA, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Middle East Concern)

- Pray for the immediate release of all those Christians who have been arrested since Christmas – and all those believers across Iran detained for their faith. Pray that God's love and peace will surround them and their families.
- Pray that the Iranian authorities will stop seeing the house church network as a threat to national security and come to see it as a force for good.

January 12, 2011: PAKISTAN – Release to present petition as fears rise for Pakistani Christians

Release will present a petition at the Pakistan High Commission in London tomorrow expressing grave concern at the lack of justice for Christians in Pakistan.

Release patron Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali and CEO Andy Dipper will meet with High Commissioner Wajid Shamsul Hasan and urge the Pakistani Government to do more to protect the Christian minority and uphold their rights. The petition they will present bears more than 50,000 signatures.

Their visit comes just nine days after the Governor of Punjab province, Salman Taseer, was assassinated – apparently for his support of Christian prisoner of faith, Asia Bibi, and his calls for the repeal of Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

Taseer, a moderate, had visited Asia in Sheikhpura District Jail after she was sentenced to death for blasphemy in November. His vocal support for Asia had been condemned by Islamist hardliners and he was shot dead by one of his own bodyguards in Islamabad on January 4.

Radical Islamic clerics have reportedly offered a reward of 500,000 rupees (about £4,000) for anyone who kills Asia Bibi. The prison authorities have stepped up security around Asia and she is now not allowed out of her cell, according to Compass Direct news agency. Her husband and children are in hiding due to ongoing threats.

Governor Taseer's murder not only threatens Asia's prospects for justice – but also those of the wider Christian community. Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani, prompted by Islamist hardliners' recent protests and strikes, said this week that the blasphemy laws would not be repealed.

Meanwhile, the self-confessed assassin, bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri, has been showered with rose petals after court appearances and hundreds of lawyers have offered to defend him for free, according to Reuters news agency.

(Sources: BBC, Compass Direct, International Christian Concern, Pakistan Christian Post, Reuters, VOM Canada)

- Pray for Bishop Michael and Andy Dipper's meeting with the High Commissioner in London at noon tomorrow. Pray for positive and frank dialogue.
- Ask God to grant the Pakistan authorities wisdom in trying to keep peace and upholding the religious rights of all citizens. Pray that officials will heed appeals for religious freedom made by Governor Salman Taseer and pray that they will not be cowed by extremist threats.
- Continue to pray God's protection over Asia Bibi and her family.
- Pray that the British media will continue to keep the plight of Christians in Pakistan high on the news agenda.