

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, July 19, 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.

July 1, 2011: IRAN – Pastor loses appeal against death sentence for apostasy

An Iranian pastor faces being executed for apostasy after he lost his appeal against the death sentence.

The Supreme Court in Qom city is widely reported to have upheld the death sentence against Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani in a ruling last Wednesday. His lawyers have yet to receive written confirmation of this decision but they understand that Pastor Yousef could be executed at any time – unless he recants his faith.

Pastor Yousef was officially sentenced to death in November 2010 and his defence team lodged an appeal the following month.

He was first arrested in October 2009 – after protesting against the compulsory teaching of the Koran in Iranian schools. He was initially charged with protesting but charges were later changed to apostasy (leaving Islam) and for evangelising Muslims, according to religious rights charity Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW).

CSW reports that Pastor Yousef had been detained previously in December 2006, also on charges of apostasy and evangelism, but was released two weeks later.

The pastor, who has two young sons with his wife Fatemeh, leads a church in the northern city of Rasht in Gilan province. Fatemeh too was detained for four months in 2010 and several other members of their church have been detained.

Middle East Concern reports that the last known judicial execution of an Iranian church leader was in December 1990 when Rev Hossein Soodman was hanged.

(Sources: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Middle East Concern, Mohabat News)

Act

- Please write a polite letter appealing for clemency for Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani to Iran's supreme leader at the following address: Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei, The Office of the Supreme Leader, Islamic Republic Street – end of Shahid Keshvar Doust Street, Tehran, Iran. (Please do NOT mention Release International in any correspondence.)

Pray

- Ask God to fill Pastor Yousef and his family with His peace, which transcends all understanding (Philippians 4:7). Pray that the Iranian authorities will relent and pardon Pastor Yousef. Pray too that Iranian officials will end their current campaign of persecution against religious minorities.

July 6, 2011: ISRAEL – Ultra-orthodox group accuses Messianic Jews of ‘proselytising’

A Jewish Christian couple in Israel are being harassed by an ultra-orthodox group that accuses them of trying to convert youths to Christianity.

Serge and Naama Kogen, Messianic Jews who live in Mevasseret Zion, a suburb west of Jerusalem, have been accused of being ‘missionaries’ targeting and manipulating local youths. In fact, the couple are native Israelis who strongly deny charges of ‘proselytising’.

The hard-line Jewish group, *Yad L’Achim*, has staged a protest outside the Kogens’ home, posted leaflets about them in the neighbourhood and even taken out a full-page advert in a local paper denouncing them. During the demonstration on June 26, about 20 supporters of the group used megaphones to attack the couple verbally for 90 minutes.

Since then opponents have threatened to burn down the Kogens’ home.

The false claims appear to be based on the fact that the Kogens had been helping a teenage neighbour who was experiencing problems at school and at home.

Compass Direct news agency reports that the 16-year-old girl strongly denied *Yad L’Achim’s* claims against the Kogens as the group demonstrated outside their home. In fact, she insisted she had not even become a Christian. ‘They are just good people,’ she said.

Serge and Naama insist they have never discussed religion with the teenager – and had sought permission from the girl’s mother for her to attend their congregational worship when the teenager herself had expressed an interest in doing so.

It was the girl’s mother who first made proselytising allegations against the Kogens to local police, who investigated but found nothing illegal. *Yad L’Achim* then took up the case and brought court proceedings against the Kogens and their congregational leader – a case that was dismissed by a judge on June 14.

Yad L’Achim is reportedly trying to push for new ‘anti-missionary laws’. Under Israeli law, spreading one’s faith is legal but ‘proselytising minors’ and offering ‘material incentives’ to conversion are not. *Yad L’Achim* is a fringe group whose views are not representative of most Israelis, according to the Kogens’ congregational leader.

NEWS UPDATE:

Lawyers for Iranian church leader Yousef Nadarkhani sentenced to death for ‘apostasy’ have been told that his case is to be returned to a local court to ‘give him more time to recant his faith’ (see Prayer Alert, July 1, 2011). This means that the death sentence against the pastor from Rasht still stands but its implementation is probably not imminent.

(Sources: Compass Direct, Middle East Concern)

- Pray that Serge and Naama Kogen in Israel will know God as their protector and strong fortress (2 Samuel 22:2). Pray for an end to this harassment.
- Thank God that the immediate threat to Iranian pastor Yousef Nadarkhani’s life has been lifted. Continue to pray that the authorities will pardon him.

July 8, 2011: SUDAN – Call to prayer on eve of independence for South Sudan

Release is encouraging its supporters to pray for peace as South Sudan prepares to become the world's newest nation.

From midnight tonight local time (9pm GMT), South Sudan will officially become an independent nation – after 99 per cent of southerners voted to split from the north in January's referendum.

The ballot was a condition of the 2005 peace deal which ended more than two decades of civil war between the mainly Arab and Muslim north and the predominantly Christian and animist south. An estimated 2 million people died in the conflict.

Sudan's current President, Omar al-Bashir, will join dignitaries from across the world in celebrations focusing on the southern capital, Juba. Earlier this week, President Bashir pledged his support for South Sudan, according to the BBC.

However, Christians in the north remain apprehensive about the future if Bashir fulfils his stated intention to introduce *Sharia* or strict Islamic law in the north after tomorrow. As recently as May, Compass Direct news agency reported the case of Omar Hassan and Amouna Ahamdi, a Christian couple in the northern capital, Khartoum, who were attacked with knives for leaving Islam.

Ongoing conflict in oil-rich border areas – such as South Kordofan and Abyei – remains a serious concern too. South Kordofan will be part of North Sudan as of tomorrow but it is home to many pro-south communities, especially in the Nuba Mountains. The Nuba people are mainly Christian and some fought with southern rebels during the civil war.

Last month, Islamist militias were accused of bombing churches and Christian homes in South Kordofan and killing at least two Christians, forcing tens of thousands of people to flee their homes. The Bishop of Kadugli, Andudu Adam Elnail, has given warning of possible 'genocide' against Christians in the region.

A referendum in Abyei for residents to decide whether to join south or north has been delayed over issues of 'voter eligibility', says the BBC. The UN Security Council sent UN peacekeepers to patrol the area last month.

A series of deals brokered in Ethiopia last month led to the withdrawal of rival forces from border areas ahead of independence – but tensions remain high.

(Sources: BBC, Christian Today, Compass Direct)

- Pray for peace in North and South Sudan as the country divides. Thank God for the progress that has been made since the 2005 peace accord – and pray for a just and lasting peace for the whole of Sudan.
- Pray particularly for Christians living in North Sudan which is expected to introduce *Sharia*. Pray that their religious freedom will be respected. Ask God to guide and grow the church in South Sudan and raise up strong church and political leaders to shape this new nation.

July 12, 2011: NIGERIA – Three killed in church bombing amid mounting threat from militia group

Three people died when a bomb exploded at a church close to the Nigerian capital, Abuja, on Sunday.

Two women were killed instantly when explosives were detonated at the All Christian-Fellowship Mission in Suleja, Niger state – and a man later died of his injuries in hospital. Agence-France Presse (AFP) news agency reports that seven others were seriously injured.

The blast went off just after 3pm, shortly after a service and during a church committee meeting. Windows in one side of the building were reportedly blown out by the force of the explosion.

Although there have been no reports of any group claiming responsibility for the attack, news sources are linking it to Islamist militia group *Boko Haram*, which launched a series of attacks in the run-up to April's elections. In fact, its campaign of violence has continued ever since, escalating in recent weeks. The group is determined to extend strict *Sharia* or Islamic law across Nigeria – and has targeted Christians as well as official figures such as politicians, police and the military.

In Maiduguri, capital of Borno state in north-east Nigeria, churches were closed on Sunday during another outbreak of violence the previous day when 'multiple explosions' rocked the city. Members of the Joint Military Task Force charged with keeping order in the state are reported to have gone on the rampage, rounding up and killing people suspected of collaborating with *Boko Haram*, according to AFP. Local residents accused Task Force members of shooting innocent civilians, however.

United Press International news agency reports that more than 30 people died in Maiduguri over the weekend – and 20 homes were set alight. The violence was reportedly in retaliation for a recent *Boko Haram* bomb attack on an army patrol, which damaged buildings and vehicles.

Release partner Stefanos Foundation is concerned that recent violence may discourage Christians, particularly in the north of Nigeria, from attending church. Religious rights group Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports that *Boko Haram* has recently issued a declaration warning Nigerians to avoid Christians, security agents and government officials – or risk death.

(Sources: Agence-France Presse, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, United Press International)

- Pray for all those who were injured and bereaved in the Suleja church bomb attack. Ask God to bless the ministry of this church and add to its number.
- Pray for Christians in Maiduguri, amid warnings of possible attacks by *Boko Haram*. Pray that they will stand firm in their faith and that they will not allow recent violence to rob them of the opportunity to attend church and meet together for fellowship.