

# RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PRAYER ALERT

*Tuesday, February 2, 2010*

*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.*

## **PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS NEED YOU!**

**Release wants to recruit volunteers from around the UK and Ireland to represent the needs of persecuted Christians to their churches. Could you be a Church Rep? Your core role would be to receive and disseminate information, and encourage prayerful support for the ministry within your church. How you develop the role depends on the time you have to give. Church Reps are a vital part of the Release team. Please prayerfully consider if you can join us – and pray that many others will take on this role too. To find out more, ring Gene on 01689 823491.**

### **1. NIGERIA – Violent clashes rock Jos for the second time in just over a year**

Church leaders in Jos have appealed for calm after serious violence rocked the Plateau state capital again, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of people.

Tensions remain high and security is tight after three days of clashes between Christians and Muslims in and around Jos left at least 300 people dead and up to 18,000 people displaced. The precise death toll may never be known as the Government has ordered many bodies to be buried in mass graves.

Latest reports say that two pastors and 46 other Christians are confirmed dead. And 27 Christians are still missing, according to the Christian Association of Nigeria. Large parts of the city were badly damaged: Bukuru market, a large commercial area, was razed to the ground, with at least 1,000 shops and homes destroyed.

The trigger for the violence is unclear. Christian sources insist that Muslim youths attacked worshippers in St Michael's Church in Nasarawa Gwong and then burnt down ten other church buildings on January 17. A Muslim group, however, contends that the violence began when Christians tried to stop construction workers from rebuilding a Muslim's house which had been destroyed in violence in November 2008.

Stefanos Foundation, a Release partner in Nigeria which has launched a factfinding mission in Jos, reports that Muslim builders on the construction site, which is in a mainly Christian area, began chanting inflammatory phrases, apparently to goad local Christians. When builders started chanting '*Allahu Akbar*' (Allah is great), local youths reportedly interpreted it as a call to arms and started attacking churches. There have been reports of some people from the general Christian community retaliating and attacking Muslims.

The BBC reports that the violence had apparently been fuelled by scores of intimidating text messages, sent to both Muslims and Christians, designed to stir up religious hatred. Stefanos Foundation believes that insurgents from Nigeria's northern *Sharia* states such as Jigawa may have helped fuel the conflict.

Jos is no stranger to violence. Clashes in the city in 2001 left more than 1,000 dead and a weekend of riots in November 2008 claimed hundreds of lives.

(Sources: BBC, Compass Direct, Daily Nation [Kenya], Human Rights Watch, Stefanos Foundation)

- Pray that the cycle of violence and retribution will be broken in this troubled city.
- Pray that all those bereaved in recent clashes will choose peace, not retaliation. Pray too for committed Christians who may feel their witness has been compromised by misguided individuals committing crimes in Christ's name.

## **2. SOMALIA – Extremists shoot dead leader of underground church**

A pastor's wife has been forced to flee Somalia after Islamist extremists shot dead her husband and then threatened to kill her too.

Amina Ibrahim Hassan left Somalia with her two-year-old son Abdi after Al Shabaab extremists, who have links with al-Qaeda, murdered her husband Mohammed last month.

Soon after her husband's murder, Amina received a phone call from Al Shabaab. 'We also know your home and that you are a follower of the Christians, and we are going to kill you the way we killed your husband,' they said. Both Amina and Mohammed were raised as Muslims but later became Christians.

Mohammed, 41, had arranged a new year celebration for his church in Medina, nine miles outside Mogadishu, and was attacked as he made his way there from his home in Hodan. It was not until the following day that Amina learned that he had been killed. 'We waited for him that day but he did not turn up,' Amina told Compass Direct news agency.

Compass Direct reports that Al Shabaab had apparently been monitoring Amina and her husband for some time – looking for proof that they had left Islam. Al Shabaab extremists killed at least 15 Christians in Somalia last year, targeting them specifically for their faith in their bid to 'cleanse' the country of non-Muslims.

(Source: Compass Direct)

- Pray for Amina and her son Abdi. Ask God to comfort them and provide for them as they rebuild their lives in a different country.
- Ask God to protect and multiply Somalia's underground church.

## **3. BURMA – Thousands of Karen flee their homes to avoid army attacks**

More than 2,000 ethnic minority Karen have been forced to abandon their villages and go into hiding following attacks by the Burmese army.

Troops have been shooting at villagers in Karen state in eastern Burma in a spate of attacks which began in mid-January, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

One person was found decapitated and at least four villagers were shot during recent raids on Keh Der, Hti Aw Top and Kaw Htoo Toe. Several Christian properties were burned.

Burma's military junta has long persecuted the country's ethnic minorities as part of its campaign to promote Buddhism and impose a blanket national identity. Many of Burma's ethnic minorities, however, have campaigned for greater autonomy and are seen as a

threat to national stability. Two of the largest minority groups – the Karen and the Chin – are predominantly Christian, so religious persecution has become a weapon of war.

Parts of Karen state apparently now fall within the so-called 'Black Zone', an area which the army considers to be under the control of armed resistance groups and where soldiers are instructed to shoot on sight. The junta has been launching indiscriminate attacks to take control of villages, according to sources for Compass Direct news agency.

Some observers believe that persecution of Burma's minorities will intensify in the run-up to the country's first parliamentary elections in two decades, scheduled for later this year.

(Sources: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Compass Direct, Mizzima News)

- Pray for the thousands of displaced people within Burma and along its borders. An estimated 140,000 Karen people are thought to have fled to Thailand.
- Pray that greater democracy and religious freedom will result from the election.

#### **4. PAKISTAN – Christian jailed for life after 'petty row' sparks blasphemy charge**

A young Christian shopkeeper has been given a life sentence for 'blasphemy' – but locals insist he was 'set up' by a business rival.

Imran Masih, who is in his 20s, was convicted of desecrating the Koran after another shopkeeper accused him of burning a copy of Islam's holy book. Imran, who comes from the Hajvairy suburb of Faisalabad, insists that it was not the Koran he was burning but a pile of old business records he was throwing out of his shop.

After the incident in July, his accuser, who is reported to be part of an Islamist extremist group, allegedly used a mosque loudspeaker to incite a mob to beat Imran and ransack his shop, according to Compass Direct.

Local people said that they had seen Imran and the other shopkeeper arguing a few days previously. They believe the blasphemy charge resulted from a petty business squabble.

Imran, who was also given a ten-year sentence and fined more than £700 for 'outraging religious feelings' at the hearing on January 11, is reported to be planning to appeal to a higher court. He is being held at Faisalabad District Jail.

(Sources: Compass Direct, VOM Canada)

- Ask God to strengthen Imran and his family. Pray his appeal will be successful.
- Pray that local people will have the courage to speak up for Imran and against divisive elements trying to stir up religious intolerance.

#### **Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on February 16, 2010.**

Through our international network of missions, we serve persecuted Christians in 30 countries around the world by supporting pastors and Christian prisoners, and their families; supplying Christian literature and Bibles; and working for justice. Release is a member of the UK organisations Global Connections, the Evangelical Alliance and the Micah Network.

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