

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, April 26, 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.

April 8, 2011: EGYPT – Copts ‘terrorised’ by gang leader

Campaigners from ten human rights organisations have joined Christians in Cairo protesting against a spate of brutal attacks on two Coptic villages.

The two demonstrations held so far outside the Attorney General’s office have called for urgent action against a gang ‘terrorising’ Copts in Upper Egypt with rape, kidnap and extortion.

Since late-January, Copts in the villages of Badraman and Nazlet Badraman, Minya province, have reportedly suffered sustained attacks by a 200-strong gang of thugs who are specifically targeting Christians.

The first violent attack on a Coptic family was on January 28. The family reported the assault to police but later withdrew their allegations after death threats from the gang.

On January 29, the gang leader raped two Coptic women, threatening to kill their children if they took the matter to the police. A 30-year-old man and a 12-year-old boy were later kidnapped; their families paid ransoms of about £20,000 and £50,000 respectively to secure their release. The gang has also reportedly imposed a night-time curfew on Copts.

Protester Nader Shoukry told the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA), ‘(Their leader) is practising injustice and tyranny only against the Copts in the villages. He walks between Christian homes, carrying a weapon on his shoulder.’

Copts from the village are dismayed that the police and army have not taken more decisive steps to detain the gang and its leader. AINA reports that police stormed Badraman village last Sunday but the gang had fled following a tip-off. The police withdrew, the gang returned and the villagers were left ‘at the mercy of a furious gang leader’. The thugs have continued their assaults since Sunday.

Christians in Egypt generally remain apprehensive about who or what will fill the political void in September’s presidential election.

Tensions between Muslims and Christians remain high in some areas. Islamist extremists destroyed the Church of St Mina and St George in Soul, near Cairo, last month (*Prayer Alert, March 11, 2011*). Violent clashes between Christians and Muslims in Mokattam village in Cairo in response to the attack on Soul left up to about nine Christians dead, AINA reports.

(Sources: Assyrian International News Agency, International Christian Concern)

- Pray that the authorities will take immediate and decisive action to apprehend gang members accused of persecuting Copts in villages in Minya province.
- Continue to pray for Christians in Egypt in these uncertain days. Ask God to fill them with His peace and make them a channel for His love and grace.

April 12, 2011: CHINA – Officials arrest Christians forced to worship outdoors

Beijing officials detained scores of Christians when a congregation held their Sunday worship outdoors after being barred entry to their normal meeting venue.

Up to 1,000 police officers cordoned off the public area where the Shouwang Church had gathered for worship last weekend – and made 169 arrests. Some Christians were taken in buses and vans to police stations; others were driven to a primary school where they reportedly sang hymns.

Three senior leaders of the church are still in detention and several others remain under tight surveillance, according to Release partner China Aid.

Furthermore, more than 20 pastors and elders of the church were reportedly held under house arrest last Saturday to prevent them from attending the service.

The church, which is one of the largest in Beijing with about 1,000 members, had advertised that it was due to meet outdoors, partly in protest at the ongoing harassment it has suffered from officials over recent years.

In fact, the meeting area in Haidan district where they congregated on Sunday is adjacent to a property that they legally own – the Daheng New Epoch Technology building. Shouwang Church bought the office building a year ago but, under pressure from officials, the building's management company has yet to hand over the keys.

Until recently, the church was meeting in the Old Story Club restaurant – but its landlord then bowed to pressure from Beijing officials and asked them to leave. China Aid reports that the church tried in vain to register with the Government two years ago.

It is believed that the church has attracted officials' attention because its members include many well-educated people, including human rights lawyers, former government officials and religious scholars.

NEWS UPDATE:

Release is calling on its supporters to pray for Beijing lawyer Gao Zhisheng who has not been seen since he disappeared for a second time a year ago. Gao, who is a Christian, had been in detention since February 2009 and reappeared on March 27, 2010. Two weeks later, however, he was detained again. His family, who have fled to the US, have had no contact with him since. Gao Zhisheng has been kidnapped, arrested, imprisoned and tortured by the Chinese authorities for defending religious rights.

(Sources: Associated Press, China Aid, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Compass Direct, Reuters)

- Pray that international coverage of the Shouwang Church's plight will force the Beijing authorities to allow it to meet in the building it legally owns.
- Pray for the immediate release of Gao Zhisheng. Pray that he can be reunited quickly with his wife and children. Pray that God's peace, which transcends all understanding, will guard their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7).

April 14, 2011: PAKISTAN – Christian leaders call for calm after Bible destroyed

Church leaders in Pakistan say they have forgiven a man who tore up a Bible in a Lahore church and are urging other Christians to follow their lead.

The Christian community in Lahore were reportedly outraged when a man ripped up a copy of the Bible at the church gates last Friday in retaliation for a US pastor's highly publicised burning of the Koran.

But Lahore's Archdiocesan Vicar General Andrew Nisari used his address to the Lahore church's congregation to call for calm. 'Promise me you won't riot,' he said. 'Promise you won't fight. It is another trial for Christianity in Pakistan. Be patient in suffering and follow the passion of Christ.'

A guard at the church told Asia news service UCA News that a man entered the building during a service, pulled a book from a plastic bag, tore its pages then shouted that he had avenged the

burning of the Koran. Police have since charged a man with blasphemy for 'outraging religious feeling'.

The retired Archbishop of Lahore, Lawrence Saldanha, urged Christians to leave the state legal system to deal with the suspect – though he did express concerns over what he saw as 'growing anti-Christian sentiment'.

A Florida pastor's decision to burn the Koran after a mock trial three weeks ago sparked outrage among Muslims and Christians alike. UCA News reports that three churches in Pakistan have been attacked since the incident. In neighbouring Afghanistan, seven foreign UN workers were killed by protesters in Mazar-e-Sharif.

NEWS UPDATE:

Release partners in Pakistan are calling for prayer for Asia Bibi, the 45-year-old woman on death row for blasphemy, who is said to be unwell in prison. Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan (SLMP) has confirmed reports that Asia has chicken pox – which some sources have attributed directly to the unsanitary conditions in the jail. Contrary to some earlier new reports, SLMP says she is receiving medical treatment from the prison authorities. Asia, who is from Punjab, was given the death sentence in November after being convicted of blasphemy following a discussion about faith with her work colleagues (*Prayer Alert, November 8, 2010*). Her appeal is still pending. She is being kept in solitary confinement and has received several death threats.

(Sources: ASSIST News Service, BBC, Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan, UCA News)

- Pray that Pakistan's Christian community will heed calls for restraint and forgiveness after the desecration of a Bible in Lahore. Pray that their response will be a powerful witness to Muslims and other faith communities everywhere.
- Ask God to bless, comfort and heal Asia Bibi, whose illness is yet another blow to her and her family. Pray that her appeal will be heard soon and will be successful.

April 15, 2011: INDIA – Orissa group hauled into court for turning to Christ

Six recently baptised Christians were arrested in northern Orissa after Hindu activists accused them of converting to Christianity 'illegally'.

The six ethnic minority Christians, who had recently joined Good Shepherd Ministries in Mayurbhanj district, appeared in court but were released on bail, according to Release partner All India Christian Council (AICC).

Their pastor, Mannuel Mahapatra, was also arrested and accused of forcible conversion. Hindu extremists frequently level accusations of forcible conversion at pastors – but allegations against those who are converted are less common.

The state of Orissa has implemented anti-conversion legislation and its Freedom of Religion Act bans religious conversions without the prior permission of local police and a district magistrate.

In Karnataka state, nine members of the New India Church of God in Mysore were arrested last Sunday after Hindu extremists stormed the church. Attacks on individual Christians in Karnataka also continue. Four Christians were beaten and charged with 'outraging religious feelings' after distributing pamphlets in Nandimotte village on April 1.

NEWS UPDATE:

Afghan Christian Said Musa was released from prison in February after nine months in jail on apostasy charges (*Prayer Alert, December 17, 2010*). He was quietly granted asylum in Europe. This news supersedes Release's printed *Prayer Shield* entry for April 17, calling for prayer for his release.

(Sources: All India Christian Council, AsiaNews, Christian Today, Compass Direct)

- Pray that all charges will be dropped against the six Orissa Christians charged with illegal conversion. Pray that the Indian Government will do more to uphold individual citizens' religious rights, especially in states with anti-conversion legislation.
- Ask God to walk closely with Said Musa as he rebuilds his life abroad.

APRIL 20, 2011: EASTER PRAYER – For those who share in Christ's sufferings

As we prepare to mark the death and resurrection of Jesus, we invite you to remember Christians suffering in His name this Easter.

We also want to thank you for your persistent prayers on behalf of persecuted Christians worldwide – and to remind you that 'the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective' (James 15:16).

We have no doubt that your prayers have helped to bring breakthrough and ease suffering in many seemingly impossible situations.

Since the new year, we have celebrated the release of Uzbek pastor Dmitry Shestakov who had been imprisoned for 'illegal religious activities' (*Prayer Alert, January 28, 2011*). Pastor Dmitry, who was freed on January 21 after serving a four-year sentence, still faces severe restrictions – so he and his family still need our prayers.

Afghan Christian Said Musa, who faced a possible death sentence for apostasy (*Prayer Alert, December 17, 2010*), was freed in February. He was quietly granted asylum in Europe – after nine months in jail in Kabul during which he suffered torture and abuse.

And in Sudan, where a brutal civil war divided north and south along ethnic and religious lines, the transition towards an independent South Sudan has so far been peaceful. January's referendum on whether the south should secede was approved internationally as free and fair. The next focus for prayer is July 9 – when South Sudan officially becomes an independent nation.

There are, however, many situations around the world that require ongoing prayer. Many Christian prisoners of faith remain in detention despite fervent prayer and advocacy. It is now two years since Beijing lawyer Gao Zhisheng was seized – apparently for his religious rights work – and his family has had no contact with him, apart from during his brief reappearance in April 2010.

Another high-profile Christian lawyer, Jiang Tianyong, who has worked tirelessly for religious freedom in China, was seized on February 19. Officials have refused to tell his family where he is or what he is charged with (*Prisoners of Faith Alert, April 2011*). And appeal judges recently upheld the 15-year sentence being served by Uyghur pastor Alimjan Yimit for 'instigating separatism and revealing state secrets to foreigners'.

In Pakistan, Punjabi Christian Asia Bibi remains on death row for blasphemy, pending an appeal. Release partners confirm reports that she has been receiving treatment for chicken pox (*Prayer Alert, April 14, 2011*).

Meanwhile, in some countries, Christians continue to suffer frequent, sometimes systematic, persecution. In North Korea, for example, the focus of Release's campaigning this year, Christians can be jailed simply for owning a Bible. In Nigerian states such as

Plateau, Christians are suffering frequent violence – and continue to plead for greater protection from the authorities.

And in India, Hindu extremists frequently attack Christians – both physically and with accusations of forcible conversion.

On behalf of the persecuted church worldwide, including the many persecuted Christians not listed here, we thank you for your continued prayers.

(Sources: BBC, China Aid, Open Doors, Release sources)

Act

- Find out more about how you can get involved in our *One Day* campaign for North Korea. Visit www.releaseinternational.org/current

Pray

- As we celebrate Christ's resurrection, let's thank God that the power of His Spirit that raised Jesus from the grave lives in us (Romans 8:11). And let's call on that same Spirit as we pray for persecuted Christians.
- Pray for Christians across the world who are sharing in Christ's sufferings this Easter. Pray that they will truly know that theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:10).