

# RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, March 29, 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 10, 2011: EGYPT – Copts protest in street as attacks continue unchallenged**

Thousands of Coptic Christians have taken to the streets to demand more protection after Islamist extremists torched and destroyed a village church near Cairo.

A mob of up to 4,000 Islamists exploded gas cylinders inside the Church of St George and St Mina in Sool village last Friday then demolished it over the course of Saturday.

This followed calls by a hardline cleric to 'kill all the Christians' – after rumours of an affair between a Coptic man and a Muslim woman, which is forbidden under *Sharia* or Islamic law.

Pastor Hoshea Abd Al-Missieh narrowly escaped being killed in the fire which engulfed his church. He described having to choose between being burnt alive or running the gauntlet of extremists outside the church.

Eventually, Pastor Hoshea chose to flee the flames – and was met outside by a man with a rifle. 'No one will touch this man: he is with me,' the armed man yelled at the mob, as he escorted Pastor Hoshea to safety.

Some reports say that the mob prevented the fire brigade from entering the village. Muslims have since set up blockades around Sool, claiming that they want to turn it into an 'Islamic village'.

Compass Direct news agency reports that the extremists prayed at the site and immediately started raising funds to build a mosque there. However, Reuters news agency reports that the Egyptian army has promised to rebuild the church by Easter.

Copts have held protests, demanding greater protection, outside a TV station in the Egyptian capital, 22 miles away from Sool, on at least two occasions since the attack. Moderate Muslims have reportedly protested with them. However, there have been clashes between Muslims and Christians in the capital this week.

Copts are still uncertain about the future in an emerging post-Mubarak Egypt. Since the popular uprising earlier this year, several monasteries have had confrontations with the army: at least three monasteries have tried to erect security fences around their property, which have then been torn down by the military. In Wadi Al-Natroun, soldiers used live ammunition to repel monks who tried to protest.

The country's new Prime Minister, Essam Sharaf, has reportedly begun a dialogue with Coptic leaders and further meetings are planned.

(Sources: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Compass Direct, Middle East Concern, Reuters)

- Ask God to protect Pastor Hoshea and other members of the Church of St George and St Mina. Pray that their faith will be strengthened through this ordeal. Pray that they will indeed have a new building soon.
- Pray for Egypt's new Prime Minister, Essam Sharaf, as he grapples with the task of helping to shape a new Egypt. Pray that religious liberty for all will be high on his agenda.

## **March 15, 2011: UK – Call to prayer for authorities to respect Christian conscience**

Release's ministry focuses on supporting Christians suffering persecution abroad but we are increasingly concerned by threats in the UK to Christians' freedom of conscience.

Several cases involving the clash of Christians' religious beliefs with human rights law have hit the headlines recently – and many more go unreported.

There has been widespread coverage of the case of Eunice and Owen Johns, the Derby couple rejected as respite foster parents because they told social workers that they could not tell a child a homosexual lifestyle was acceptable. They lost their High Court battle for their right to foster in February.

At least two Christian couples running B&Bs have had legal proceedings brought against them for refusing to allow homosexual couples to share a double room. Tory MP Chris Grayling was removed from his post of Shadow Home Secretary after he was recorded saying that B&B owners should be allowed to follow their conscience.

And counsellor Lesley Pilkington is facing disciplinary proceedings by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy for trying to help a man struggling with unwanted homosexual feelings. He turned out to be an undercover reporter.

Christian registrar Lillian Ladele was disciplined for gross misconduct by Islington Council after she asked to be excluded from presiding over homosexual civil partnerships. And Somerset nurse Caroline Petrie was suspended after offering to pray for a patient – though she was later reinstated.

Previously, homelessness officer Duke Amachree had been sacked for 'gross misconduct' by Wandsworth council after he suggested a woman with an incurable illness should 'put her faith in God'. And Christian magistrate Andrew McClintock was forced to resign from hearing family cases in Sheffield after he was refused permission to opt out of cases that could have led to adoption by gay couples. He lost his appeal.

These are not isolated cases. Campaign group Christian Concern says its sister organisation Christian Legal Centre (CLC), whose lawyers specialise in religious rights legislation, has about 50 similar cases on its books. The Christian Institute, a campaigning charity, also has a growing caseload. In 12 months, it had 114 calls from UK Christians who believed they were facing discrimination.

Campaign groups such as the Christian Institute are concerned that the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007 is being used to curtail Christians' freedom of conscience and even discriminate against them.

The High Court judges in the Johns' case ruled that laws protecting people from discrimination because of their sexual orientation 'should take precedence' over the right not to be discriminated against on religious grounds.

The Johns' lawyer said last week the couple will not appeal because to do so would be 'futile' as the courts are currently 'set against religious freedom for Christians'.

In a recent article in *The Daily Telegraph*, Mike Judge of the Christian Institute said that legislation designed to protect one minority group was now being used against another – Christians. 'Discrimination law is meant to act as a shield to protect people from unfair treatment, not to be used as a sword to attack those whose beliefs you disagree with,' he wrote.

CLC Director Andrea Minichiello Williams told Release International recently: 'It seems a religious bar to office has been created, whereby a Christian who wishes to act on their Christian beliefs... will no longer be able to work in a greater number of environments. How can 21<sup>st</sup>-century Britain have become a place like this?'

Even within the Christian community opinion can be divided over individual cases and care is needed to read beyond the headlines to understand fully the details of every case. Release is not going to divert its efforts from its core ministry abroad but would encourage all supporters to engage with Christian Concern and the Christian Institute, whose calling is specifically to this area of work within the UK. Visit [www.christianconcern.com](http://www.christianconcern.com) and [www.christian.org.uk](http://www.christian.org.uk) for further information.

(Sources: BBC, Christian Concern, Christian Institute, Release International, *The Times* online)

## Act

- Sign Christian Concern's new petition calling on David Cameron to respect Christian conscience and take urgent action to address the problems created by equalities legislation. Go to: <http://christianconcern.com/equalities-and-conscience>

## Pray

- Pray that the Prime Minister will take note of UK Christians' concerns and take action to uphold freedom of conscience.
- Pray specifically for Christians whose freedom of conscience has been limited by recent court rulings. Many have suffered abuse and threats. Ask God to protect them and strengthen their faith.
- Pray for wisdom for organisations that support Christians directly affected by these issues – and that are lobbying for government action to uphold Christians' freedom of conscience.

## **March 18, 2011: TURKEY – Religious freedom still limited four years after Malatya murders**

Christians in Turkey still face discrimination and harassment – even four years after the Malatya Christian murders sent shock waves through the nation.

The Christian minority in Turkey still suffer attacks on their churches and members, slander or discrimination on 'a daily basis' – according to a new report from the Turkish Association of Protestant Churches (TEK).

Turkish laws and the 'negative attitudes of civil servants' pose substantial barriers to Christians wanting to establish places of worship, especially Protestants, says TEK.

Forum 18 news agency reports that Turkey's bid to become a full member of the European Union brought legal changes which made it possible in theory for non-Muslims to establish places of worship. However, in practice, local officials have 'wide discretion' in granting licences – and often refuse.

Furthermore, missionary activities are widely seen as a threat to national security, according to the TEK report. And Christian parents have reported not being allowed to withdraw their children from Islamic teaching at school, despite the fact that the authorities permit them to do so in principle.

Only last week, Turkish media reported that police detained two teenagers on suspicion of plotting to murder a church leader in Istanbul, according to Compass Direct news agency.

Christians had hoped that the national outrage at the murder of three Christians at a publishing house in Malatya would prompt officials to crack down on religious intolerance. Necati Aydin, Ugur Yuksel and Tilmann Geske were brutally tortured and murdered in April 2007.

The trial of five suspects in the case continues. Prosecution lawyers have expressed concern that one of the three judges presiding over the case was recently given a new post in Ankara and had to be replaced. The complexities of the case – which prosecution lawyers are trying to link with a wider conspiracy to destabilise the government – mean that it will inevitably take time for a new judge to get up to speed.

(Sources: Compass Direct, Forum 18)

- Ask God to protect and build the faith of His church in Turkey.
- Pray that Turkish officials will heed the TEK report, take a tougher stand against intolerance and commit to upholding religious freedom for all.

## **March 22, 2011: NIGERIA – Extremists 'stir up unrest' ahead of April elections**

Fresh attacks on Christians and churches in Plateau have raised fears that extremists are trying to stir up unrest ahead of presidential elections next month.

In Plateau state, central Nigeria, bombers appeared to be targeting church goers when they detonated a device in Nasawara Gwom, a mainly Christian district of Jos, on Sunday. However, they succeeded only in killing themselves and damaging a nearby shop.

The intended targets of this attack were apparently members of the nearby Church of Christ In Nigeria and the Evangelical Church Winning All.

Militants also planted a second bomb behind the headquarters of the Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministry but it was discovered and made safe.

Churches were already on high alert – after warnings of bomb attacks. Release sources suggest that extremists may have been trying to sidestep heightened security around churches, by targeting Christians on their journeys home.

Release sources in Nigeria say that extremists appear to be trying to whip up religious violence to create a state of emergency in Plateau ahead of the elections on April 9. Last week, security officials intercepted a truckload of explosives and ammunition in Jos.

Release partners also reported that three other people, said to be Christians, were killed earlier on Sunday – and six others stabbed.

The Most Rev Dr Benjamin Kwashi, Archbishop of Jos, told Release today: 'The only real answer is prayer. I trust God to defend us. I have been threatened with death personally three times. In all three times, the Lord has rescued me.'

Violence continues in other parts of Nigeria. In Bauchi state, immediately north of Plateau, reports suggest that more than 4,000 people fled their homes after armed assailants launched night raids on villages in the Tafawa Balewa area on March 10. Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports that extremists burnt down 13 churches and more than 450 homes.

#### **News update:**

Release has just learnt that Shi Weihang, who ran a Christian bookshop in Beijing, China, was released from prison on February 9 after serving almost three years for 'illegal business activities'. Supporters have always insisted Shi's bookshop stocked only books he was legally authorised to sell. Shi, who led a house church, is now back with his family.

(Sources: China Aid, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Open Doors, Stefanos Foundation)

- Pray for an end to the cycle of violence in parts of Nigeria such as Plateau and Bauchi states, where extremists are attacking Christians and churches with apparent impunity. Pray that the authorities will take a tougher stand against extremist violence.
- Pray for Shi Weihang, his wife and two children as they readjust to life together. Pray specifically for Shi's health: his diabetes caused him health problems in custody.

#### **March 24, 2011: SAUDI ARABIA – Eritrean Christian could face execution**

An Eritrean Christian faces a possible death sentence after being accused of preaching to Muslims outside a mosque in Saudi Arabia.

Mussie Eyob, a relatively new Christian, is currently being held at a high-security prison in Jeddah after Saudi officials arrested him at a mosque in the Haya Roda area on February 12.

Officials presumed initially Mussie must have some mental health issues – but a medical examination found him to be in good mental health.

Release's partner, Release Eritrea, reports that Mussie is being treated well and is in good spirits – and his family were able to visit him on March 20.

Release Eritrea is calling on Christians in the UK to pray that Mussie will be shown clemency and released.

- Ask God to protect and sustain Mussie – and pray for his release.