

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, June 07, 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.

May 20, 2011: PAKISTAN – Christian teenager abducted in revenge for ‘honour crime’

A 17-year-old Christian girl has reportedly been taken hostage by a Muslim family whose daughter has allegedly eloped with the Christian’s brother.

Maryam was taken by force from her home near Sheikhpura on Monday – and her abductors have said they will not release her until their own daughter is found.

The row between the Masih family and a prominent local Muslim family has caused tensions between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority in the area.

A local Christian leader quoted by Compass Direct news agency described the situation as ‘critical’, warning that tensions could soon erupt into violence. There are between 70 and 100 Christian families in the area, compared with about 1,800 Muslim families.

The Muslim family’s fury was unleashed after rumours spread that their daughter had eloped with Maryam’s older brother, Sajid. First, they took captive Sajid’s brother, an uncle, a cousin and his other sister, Rakhel. The four Christians were allegedly beaten and abused for several hours to try to force them to disclose Sajid’s whereabouts. The Masih family insist they do not know where their son is.

Rakhel, who is in her 20s, was held from Saturday till Monday, when she was released – only to be replaced by her younger sister, Maryam. Church leaders in the area say they are trying to persuade Muslims leaders to defuse tensions and avert the threat of violence.

The incident comes as Pakistan’s Christians reflect on the news that the vacant post of Minorities Minister, charged with championing minorities’ rights, is not now to be filled by a Muslim.

The previous incumbent, Shahbaz Bhatti, a committed Christian and outspoken defender of minorities’ rights, was assassinated by Islamist extremists in Islamabad in March (*Prayer Alert, March 2, 2011*), and a Muslim, Riaaz Hussain Pirzada, was appointed to replace him.

This week, the Government changed its mind and appointed Christian lawyer Akram Gill to head up the ministry alongside the late Mr Bhatti’s brother, Paul. *The Pakistan Times* reports that the Government has also changed the department’s name to Ministry for Interfaith Harmony and Minorities. Mr Pirzada is to become Health Minister.

(Sources: Agenzia Fides, BBC, Compass Direct, International Christian Concern, *The Pakistan Times*, VOM Canada)

- *Pray for the immediate release of Maryam Masih. Pray that the dispute between the two families can be resolved peacefully.*
- *Ask God to give wisdom to Paul Bhatti and Akram Gill at the Ministry for Interfaith Harmony and Minorities. Pray God’s protection over them.*

May 24, 2011: ERITREA – Prayer vigil for Christians as arrests continue

Release and other religious rights campaigners are holding a prayer vigil outside the Eritrean Embassy in London this Thursday on behalf of persecuted Christians in Eritrea.

As recently as last week, 65 more Christians were arrested in this East African nation in what Release partners describe as an ongoing crackdown on the Eritrean church.

Scores of arrests were reported in the first few weeks of this year in Asmara, the capital, and in the town of Nakfa in eastern Eritrea (*Prayer Alert, January 20, 2011*).

The latest estimates suggest that about 1,500 Christians are detained for their faith in Eritrea, often in appalling conditions.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)'s recently published annual report for 2011 describes the religious freedom situation in Eritrea as 'grave'. The USCIRF again designates Eritrea as a 'country of particular concern' – a designation it has held since 2004.

As well as facing religious rights abuses, Eritrean Christians are also caught up in another human rights scandal – the trafficking of people trying to flee Eritrea.

Hundreds of thousands of Eritreans have fled their homeland, mostly to Ethiopia, Egypt and eastern Sudan. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees reports that increasingly large numbers are claiming religious persecution in Eritrea and Pentecostal Christians reportedly make up a large percentage of these refugees.

Release Eritrea, a partner of Release, says it is increasingly concerned that these refugees are prey to ruthless traffickers who are accused of abuse, enslavement or even murder.

Release International will be joined by seven other organisations meeting to pray outside the Eritrean Embassy on Thursday. They will present a letter to the Ambassador calling for greater religious freedom.

On the same day, MEPs in Brussels will be attending a special Hearing on Freedom of Religion or Belief in the European Parliament. The hearing comes in response to the Parliament's concerns over ongoing religious persecution in many countries, including Eritrea.

(Sources: Release Eritrea, The European Parliament, UNHCR, USCIRF)

Pray

- *Pray for the success of both Thursday's prayer vigil and the special European Parliament hearing in Brussels. Pray that Eritrean officials in London will take note of campaigners' concerns and that MEPs in Brussels will be mobilised to take strong action to promote religious freedom worldwide.*
- *Continue to pray for Christians in Eritrea, amid ongoing persecution. Pray that they will know God as their refuge and their strength.*

Act

- *Join us for the prayer vigil outside the Eritrean Embassy at 96 White Lion Street, London (near Angel tube station) this Thursday, May 26. Gather at 3.15pm for an hour of prayer from 3.30pm.*
- *Send an email urging your MEP to attend the Hearing on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Brussels this Thursday. Go to www.writetothem.com to email your MEP direct.*

May 26, 2011: COLOMBIA – Christians on high alert over guerrilla attacks

Christians in rebel-held areas of Colombia are reported to be on high alert as guerrilla violence intensifies.

Christians have long been a target for Marxist guerrilla groups such as FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) – but Release contacts say that a spate of recent attacks is causing particular concern.

Instability has been growing in the Meta region, a traditional guerrilla stronghold and scene of several recent attacks, including shootings and even a bomb attack in the town of Puerto Lleras on May 12.

Earlier, on May 2, FARC guerrillas raided a Christian house in the Arauca region and shot and killed a 14-year-old girl, Mayerli Niño Blanco. When her pastor Gualberto Nieves rushed to help the family, he too was shot dead.

Release partner Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) Canada reports that FARC has also been conducting an ‘internal purge’ of those in its ranks whom it suspects of being Christian. The guerrillas have reportedly killed many of their own men and accused them of being traitors to the communist cause.

‘In all our [time] in Colombia, we have never seen it this unstable,’ said a VOM contact. ‘Yet we believe that this is also the most opportune time that we have ever seen for the Gospel.’

Christian activity is restricted or banned in many parts of Colombia held by left-wing rebels. Religious rights group Christian Solidarity Worldwide says it has received reports of this happening in 12 of Colombia’s 32 departments.

The standing of pastors as community leaders makes them a perceived threat to the authority of the guerrilla groups; church leaders have also been targeted for their efforts to dissuade young people from enlisting with the rebels. Guerrilla leaders have also stated that Christianity is incompatible with their own ideologies.

Release’s work in Colombia includes supporting a radio ministry which broadcasts into rebel-held areas where Christian activity is restricted. And Release partner VOM USA funds a ministry committed to spreading the Gospel to FARC, releasing parachutes containing Christian literature and radios into rebel-held zones.

(Sources: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, VOM Canada, VOM USA)

- *Pray for courage and endurance for Colombia’s Christians who, in many areas, risk their lives daily to follow Christ.*
- *Pray particularly for the families of Mayerli and Pastor Gualberto, killed by FARC earlier this month, and for their church.*

June 01, 2011: PAKISTAN – Christians forgive gang after attack on church

A rural church congregation have forgiven a gang who attacked their church after Release partners prompted local Muslims to make a public apology.

Christians in the mainly Muslim village of Lakho Ki, Lahore district, were badly shaken after an armed gang raided their Presbyterian church last Sunday and started smashing up its contents.

Release partner Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan (SLMP) reports that three or four elderly Christians were slapped and beaten with bamboo sticks, although none required medical treatment. The altar, tables and Bibles were damaged in the raid.

When an SLMP team came to the villagers' aid, they realised Christians were reluctant to file a case against their assailants, whom they believed to be local Muslims. Christians in the village rely on wealthy landowners for their income.

SLMP also recognised that there was little point registering a complaint with police, who often fail to uphold minority Christians' rights. Instead, SLMP contacted senior police officials and explained there would be a protest unless action was taken to prevent further attacks.

After negotiations with SLMP, Muslim community and religious leaders gathered in front of the Presbyterian church in Lakho Ki, made a public apology to local Christians and promised there would be no further attacks.

An SLMP spokesperson said that the decision not to pursue the matter through the courts did not mean the Christians were simply stepping down. Instead, he said, they were showing that forgiveness was more powerful than revenge – a strong statement in a country whose notorious blasphemy laws are widely abused to persecute religious minorities such as Christians.

“The gang committed blasphemy against these Christians but we can give an example of forgiveness and show how we can be peaceful. In this light, we are showing that they can forgive people like Asia Bibi and show their courage.’

Asia Bibi, a farm labourer from Punjab, remains on death row after being convicted of blasphemy last November following an argument over religion with work colleagues.

(Source: Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan)

- *Ask God to heal all those who suffered physical or psychological injury during the attack on the Presbyterian church in Lakho Ki.*
- *Pray that the Christians' powerful witness to God's forgiveness and unconditional love will speak into the hearts of their neighbours and help to avert any further attacks.*