

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, November 8, 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.

October 21, 2011: KAZAKHSTAN – Tough religious policy enforced before law enacted

Churches in Kazakhstan say officials are enforcing tough new policies on religious activity even before they have passed into law.

Kazakh Christians fear the new Religion Law will severely limit religious freedom by, for example, requiring all churches to re-register – and imposing strict registration criteria (*Prayer Alert, September 27, 2011*).

Officially the law does not come into force until Wednesday (October 26). But evidence gathered by Forum 18 news service suggests that Kazakh officials are already citing the law to crack down on religious activity.

In the south-west city of Atyrau, for example, police and security officials raided a worship meeting held in a local hall by a state-registered Protestant church called New Life last month. Officials cited the new Religion Law as the ground for the raid. A 17-year-old girl who tried to film the incident on her mobile phone was knocked unconscious by a police officer.

Officials claimed that the church could not legally meet outside its legally registered address – which is a local hotel. The church maintains that they had been forced to meet in the hall because officials had forced the hotel to end its rental agreement with them.

Shortly before the raid, officials published an article in a local paper claiming that New Life pastor Galymzhan Nagmadinov was ‘brainwashing’ his congregation for his own financial gain. He roundly denies the accusation.

Kazakh Christians had expressed concern that the proposed legislation had been rushed through Parliament and should not have been approved without significant amendment – but President Nursultan Nazarbaev put his signature to the new laws on October 11.

Religious rights campaigners claim the new Religion Law violates Kazakhstan’s international human rights commitments. As well as imposing a complex new registration system, it requires faith groups to have both central and local government approval to build or open new places of worship. Other legislation soon to be approved has serious implications for the religious freedom of particular groups, such as children, and for the freedom to print religious literature.

NEWS UPDATE:

Release partners report that Pakistani Christian Agnus Bibi, who is awaiting trial for ‘blasphemy’, has been released on bail from jail in Faisalabad on health grounds. Detained in February, Agnus is reported to be seriously ill with a lung condition. She was admitted to hospital in August (*Prayer Alert, August 8, 2011*) but was released after just two days, despite continuing ill health. Release partner Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan arranged her legal support to file the successful bail petition.

(Sources: Forum 18, Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan)

- Ask God to sustain His church in Kazakhstan, amid fears that new legislation will limit religious freedom. Pray that the new legislation will prove unenforceable and that amendments will be made to uphold all citizens' religious rights.
- Pray God's complete healing and protection over Agnus Bibi. Pray that all charges will be dropped.

October 25, 2011: PAKISTAN – Urgent prayer for 'blasphemy' bail hearing

Release partners in Pakistan have requested urgent prayer for tomorrow's bail hearing of a Punjab Christian convicted of blasphemy.

Ruqqiya Bibi will appear before the High Court in Lahore – in the hope that she will be released on bail, pending an appeal against a 25-year jail sentence. She has already spent almost three years in custody.

Ruqqiya and her husband, Munir, were sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment under Section 295-B of Pakistan's blasphemy laws in March 2010. They were arrested by Mustafabad police in December 2008 for touching Islam's sacred scripture without ritually washing.

Release partner CLAAS (Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement) has been supporting the couple from Kasur for some time. CLAAS applied successfully for Munir to be released on bail last November, pending an appeal to the High Court in Lahore. CLAAS also arranged safe accommodation for Munir after his release on bail.

Ruqqiya's application for bail on that occasion was turned down – but CLAAS hopes its legal team will have greater success this time.

A CLAAS spokesperson said: 'We need your prayers for the release, as well as for the safety of Ruqqiya and her family after her release from the prison. We do hope that she will be released and be allowed to celebrate Christmas with her family.'

NEWS UPDATE:

Egyptian Christians have welcomed a court ruling in favour of those seeking to have their religious registration on their ID cards officially changed back to 'Christian'. The recent ruling of the Supreme Administrative Court applies to anyone who was originally registered as 'Christian' but whose registration was later changed to 'Muslim' (whether voluntarily or not). More than 2,500 people were part of the application to the court. They included a Christian mother, Kamilia, for whom the ruling means the successful end to a long legal fight to change her twin sons' registration back to 'Christian'. Their registration had been changed to 'Muslim' by their father when their parents divorced. Twins Andrew and Mario have now been issued with new ID cards which state they are 'Christian'. The boys' incorrect registration as 'Muslims' had caused them difficulties at school: in 2008, they were held back a year after refusing to take an exam in Islamic studies.

(Sources: Assist News Service, CLAAS, Middle East Concern)

- Pray that Ruqqiya Bibi will be granted bail in court tomorrow. Pray that both she and Munir will be acquitted on appeal soon. Ask God to protect them from extremist threats.
- Pray that Kamilia and her twins in Egypt – and the many other Christians in a similar position to them – will now live free from discrimination. Pray that next month's parliamentary elections in Egypt will pave the way for greater religious freedom.

November 1, 2011: MALDIVES – Teacher’s deportation sparks fears of religious liberty crackdown

Police in the Maldives deported a foreign teacher for having a Bible in his house – confirming fears that repressive new religious laws are being enforced in the island nation.

Shijo Kokkattu, a teacher from India, was detained for about a fortnight, charged with preaching Christianity then sent back to his homeland last month – after a police raid on his house in Raa Atoll.

There had been hopes that religious restrictions introduced under former dictator Maumoon Gayoom would not be enforced under President Mohamed Nasheed, who came to power in 2008 and who is widely considered to be a progressive Muslim.

But new regulations under the Protection of Religious Unity Act 1994 were published in the Government’s gazette last month and thereby brought into force, according to the World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission.

The move is considered to signal a renewed commitment in the archipelago to enforce a legal ban on the ‘propagation, display and expression’ of any religion other than Islam, reports Compass Direct news agency. Any violation of the Act is punishable by imprisonment of up to five years, banishment or house arrest. Foreigners found to be proselytising are to be deported.

The Maldivian authorities claim that all of its more than 300,000 citizens are Sunni Muslim – although many reject this. Its 2008 constitution states that non-Muslims may not become citizens of the nation.

NEWS UPDATE:

Pakistan: Punjab Christian Ruqqiya Bibi, whose bail hearing was scheduled for October 26, had her case adjourned until November 10 – because the complainant failed to turn up in court. Ruqqiya was sentenced to 25 years for ‘blasphemy’ in March 2010 and is applying for bail pending an appeal (*Prayer Alert, October 25, 2011*). Release partner CLAAS (Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement), whose legal team is supporting Ruqqiya and her family, have asked for continued prayer for them. Her husband, Munir, who received the same sentence, was freed on bail last December.

China: Release partner China Aid has just reported details of a brutal beating that the local authorities gave to blind legal activist Chen Guangcheng and his wife while under house arrest in Shandong province. The couple were subjected to a four-hour assault on July 28 after Chen was found to have made a phone call. The ringleader was reportedly the local mayor – and the attack was believed to have been witnessed by the couple’s daughter. Chen and his wife were brutally beaten in February after details of their plight were posted on YouTube. China Aid says there has been ‘no reliable news’ about the couple for months and some sources have reported that Chen may have been killed. Chen has been held under house arrest since September 2010 when he was released from jail after serving a four-year jail term. Supporters say he is being punished for exposing human rights abuses in China.

(Sources: China Aid, CLAAS, Compass Direct, WEA Religious Liberty Commission)

- Pray that the Maldivian authorities will yield to calls for greater religious freedom.
- Continue to pray for Ruqqiya Bibi and her husband, Munir, in Pakistan. Pray that her bail hearing this month will be successful and that they will both be acquitted on appeal.
- Ask God to sustain Chinese activist Chen Guangcheng and his wife amid brutal persecution. Pray that the Chinese authorities will relent and release them from house arrest.