

# RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PRAYER ALERT

*Tuesday, November 17, 2009*

*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. IRAN – Pastor jailed in protest over Islamic teaching for children**

A prominent pastor from northern Iran has been arrested for protesting about a local authority diktat that Christian children should read the Koran.

Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, described by Release sources as 'head of the largest Christian community in northern Iran', was detained in Guilan province last month and summoned to appear before a Revolutionary Tribunal.

The pastor has protested that the move to impose Islamic teaching on Christian children violated the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which Iran is a signatory. In particular, he insists that the decision contravenes Article 26, which states: 'Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.'

On his arrest, the authorities told Pastor Youcef that their patience with him had run out. 'Not content with the fact that we tolerate you, you went too far by refusing to allow your children to follow Koranic courses,' they reportedly told him. Pastor Youcef remains in detention at the time of writing.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Information has forced the Central Assemblies of God (AOG) Church in Taleghani Street, Tehran, to put a stop to its two largest worship services – apparently under pressure from extremist groups. The church was told it would be closed down completely unless it cancelled its Friday meetings, which have run since the 1960s.

Many church members wept openly when AOG Overseer Rev Soorik announced the decision because, for many in the Middle East, Sunday is a normal work day, whereas Friday is a day of rest. Sunday services at the AOG church will continue.

(Sources: Farsi Christian News Network, Present Truth Ministries, VOM Canada)

- Pray that Pastor Youcef will be released immediately and that religious liberty will be upheld in Guilan province so Christian children can opt out of Islamic teaching.
- Pray that members of the AOG church in Tehran will find a way to attend services, despite the new meeting schedule.

## **2. UGANDA – Extremist violence leaves church fearful**

A congregation near Kampala is living in fear after a violent mob armed with machetes and clubs tried to raid their Sunday worship service.

About 40 Islamist extremists attempted to storm the World Possessor's Church International in Namasuba, knocking bricks from the walls to force their way in. The congregation struggled to fend off the assault until local residents and police intervened.

One church member, who had been taking photos during the worship and continued to do so during the attack, was badly beaten and required treatment at a local health clinic. Part of the church was damaged in the raid. Attendance at the church on the next Sunday was less than half the usual number – about 100 people turned up instead of the usual 250.

Pastor Henry Zaake says he is dismayed that no arrests have been made since the attack on November 1, especially since he has continued to receive threatening messages on his phone. 'The police silence on the issue is worrying,' he told Compass Direct news agency.

Muslims have long opposed the church in Namasuba, complaining that it was trying to convert local residents to Christianity. Namasuba is a predominantly Muslim area.

(Source: Compass Direct)

- Ask God to fill His people in Namasuba with boldness so they will fear no evil. Pray there will be no further attacks on this church.
- Pray for wisdom for Pastor Henry Zaake and other church leaders.

## **3. EGYPT – Coptic Christians arrested for praying at home**

A Coptic Christian has found himself at the centre of a row over where Christian activities can lawfully be held – after inviting a pastor to his home to pray for a sick relative.

Maurice Salama Sharkawy, 37, was arrested for conducting 'religious rites without a licence' and provoking 'sectarian clashes' after he invited Pastor Elia Shafik to pray for his father, who had suffered a stroke. State security officials broke into Maurice's house in Deir Samalout, Minia province, during the prayers and took him into custody for two days. A number of his cousins were detained at the same time.

Maurice has previously been criticised by local Muslims for holding prayer meetings at his home instead of limiting his worship to the nearest church, which is more than five miles away. He is now under police observation, reports the Assyrian International News Agency.

Rev Moses Raphael of the Samalout Coptic Orthodox Diocese said that it is not now uncommon for Coptic villagers to be arrested for praying at home. He added that local authorities are increasingly reluctant to grant Christians permits to build new churches.

Maurice's arrest coincides with the release of a hard-hitting report by Christian Solidarity International and the Coptic Foundation for Human Rights exposing the issue of Christian women in Egypt being forcibly married and converted to Islam. The report documents dozens of cases of Coptic women being abducted, raped and forced to marry Muslim men – and accuses the Egyptian authorities of 'ignoring' most cases that are brought to the attention of police.

Coptic Christians, who make up between eight and 12 per cent of Egypt's population, are marginalised and discriminated against in a nation where Islam is the 'religion of the state'. (Sources: Assyrian International News Agency, Christian Post)

- Pray that Maurice Sharkawy and other local Copts will be able to worship at home.
- Pray that the Egyptian authorities will do more to uphold the religious rights of minority Coptic Christians and stamp out the abduction and forced marriage of Christian women.

#### **4. INDONESIA – Evicted theology students take to the streets in protest**

More than 1,000 Bible college students demonstrated in West Jakarta after local officials evicted them from refuges where they took shelter from attack last year.

The students from the Arastamar Evangelical Theological Seminary (SETIA) were evicted last month from temporary accommodation at the campsite and a former municipal building which have been their home for more than a year (*Prayer Alert, November 3, 2009*). They were forced out of their campus in Kampung Pulo, Jakarta, in July 2008 when a violent mob raided the college, demanding its closure (*Prayer Alert September 2, 2008*).

Amnesty International reports that at least 17 of the students have gone on hunger strike to protest that local officials have not kept their promise to provide suitable alternative accommodation. Student demonstrators recently formed a blockade outside the former West Jakarta mayoral office where some of them had been living.

The Jakarta provincial government has offered to house students in a former holding centre for migrants in North Jakarta – but SETIA college officials insist the building is not fit for habitation. SETIA's secretary Ronald Simanjuntak told Release sources: 'A barn for water buffalo is much nicer than that place. Our primary request is that we be allowed to return to our own campus peacefully.'

Jakarta officials say they are looking into building a new campus for the college in Lippo, Cikarang, West Java province.

(Sources: Amnesty International, Compass Direct)

- Pray that SETIA students and staff will be able to continue their studies.
- Pray for God's will to be done in re-establishing the college where it will have most impact for His glory.

#### **Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on Tuesday, December 1, 2009.**

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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