

release

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PAKISTAN

Let justice flow

release
international
voice of persecuted christians



Let justice flow

Pakistan *Let justice flow*

A Christian barber in Pakistan is brutally beaten and abused. His 'crime'? Trimming the beard of a Muslim teenager who had asked him to give him a more 'modern look'. A Christian woman is abducted from her home by armed men, continuously tortured, forced to marry, and told to convert to Islam.

Cover photo: Pastor Khaliq Barkat's New Apostolic Church was destroyed when militants attacked Christians in Korian, Punjab Province, Pakistan in July 2009. The church has been rebuilt from the ashes – and nothing can take away his joy. Photo: Crossfire.

Sara Masih, aged 6, takes care of her sister Nadia (4) while the family works at a brick kiln near Lahore. Sometimes entire families of poor Christians work in the brick kilns. Photo: Crossfire.



Pakistani Christians protest against the violent attacks against Christian communities in Gojra and Korian, Punjab Province, in 2009. Photo: Faisal Mahmood/Reuters.



Christian Sania James was kidnapped on April 5 by armed men, forced to marry a Muslim farmer, and told to convert to Islam. She managed to escape and is being supported by Christians. Photo: Compass Direct.



These are just two of numerous cases of abuse of Christians in Pakistan that we have heard of this year. It must not continue.

As Release's campaign calling for justice and protection for Pakistan's Christians gathers pace, and more and more completed petition forms arrive at our office, we are urging supporters in the UK and Ireland to join with us in praying for, and taking action, to help these persecuted brothers and sisters – and to tell other Christians here about their plight.

SIGN THE PETITION

Please encourage your fellow church members and contacts to sign the petition. As well as paper copies, which can be obtained from the Release office (tel 01689 823491) or downloaded from our website www.releaseinternational.org/current we would encourage supporters to make use of the online petition on our website. The petition will be presented to the Pakistan High Commission in London.

Release patron Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali is backing the campaign to 'let justice flow' for persecuted Christians in Pakistan.

He especially urges Release supporters to sign the petition, and to ask others to sign too.

'As well as urging Release supporters to continue to pray for Christians in Pakistan I would strongly encourage them to sign the petition and to raise the issue of Christian persecution in Pakistan with their local MP,' he says. 'Be assured, it really can influence the Pakistan Government.'

When you have collected signatures for this campaign, please return completed forms to the Release office as soon as you are able.

PRAYER GUIDE

Also with this edition of *Release* is a special guide for praying for Pakistan's Christian minority, covering key areas such as mob violence, physical assault, discrimination in the workplace and society and injustices in the legal system.

Please use this special pull-out guide to pray yourself, and please ask your church or small group to pray for Pakistan too.

WRISTBANDS

Please wear your *Let Justice Flow* wristbands to show your support for the campaign and to act as a prompt to prayer. They can be ordered via the website or from the office (01689 823491).

Thank you for praying and taking action for Pakistan. You can find out more about persecution in Pakistan at www.releaseinternational.org/pakistan. Let justice flow! •

Please wear your *Let Justice Flow* wristbands to show your support for the campaign



PAKISTAN
 Capital: **Islamabad**
 Population: **173 million**
 Government: **Federal republic**
 Religion: **Muslim 96%; Christian 2.5%; Hindu 1.3%**

Pakistan was born out of the partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 and Muslims' demand for their own homeland. Its present-day borders were established in 1971 when former East Pakistan, which was mainly Bengali-speaking, broke away to become Bangladesh.

Neither civilian regimes nor military dictatorships have brought political stability to a country crippled by poverty and violence.

The founder of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnar, promised equal rights for religious minorities. Yet today, Christians are among the poorest and most marginalised in Pakistani society.

Partners report that the rape of Christian women is not uncommon – and justice for them elusive.

Pakistan's blasphemy laws – especially the notorious Section 295(c) of the Penal Code – are often used against religious minorities to settle personal scores. So the number of Christians charged is disproportionately high.

The law offers little protection to Christians, given their low social status. So attacks on believers and their churches are not uncommon.

Release's work in Pakistan includes:

- Practical and pastoral support for more than 100 Christian prisoners and their families
- Backing for a group of lawyers who work to uphold the rights of religious minorities, including Christians
- Supporting the production and distribution of Christian literature, videos and CDs



‘WE FORGIVE’

On March 7 militants attacked three villages near Jos, the capital of Nigeria’s predominantly-Christian Plateau State. Up to 500 people were methodically slaughtered, many of them women and children. Even in the midst of such extreme violence, Christians there are determined to forgive their attackers.

The Hausa and Fulani Muslims ‘came in great number ... even more than 400,’ recalls Pastor Bitrus Daniel, whose church and home were destroyed in the massacre of March 7.

‘When they came, they ringed the whole village, and they started shooting guns. Some were holding knives, some were holding guns, and some were holding

fire. They were just burning houses, killing people ... They ringed the whole place, and everybody was running, out of fear.’

The attack started at around 3.15 am on Sunday, March 7, when some 400 assailants armed with guns, machetes and swords surrounded the three small villages of Dogo Nahawa, Zot and Rastat a few miles south-east of Jos city centre.

These settlements are home to the largely Christian Berom, indigenous farmers who scratch a living growing maize, vegetables and the local cereal *acha* or ‘hungry rice.’

Tension had been high between the longer-standing, indigenous Christians and Muslim settlers since January, when rioting broke out in Jos, leaving 200 dead.



Pastor Yohana Gyang stands outside the COCIN church he pastors in Dogo Nahawa. Both his wife Rose and eighteen-year-old daughter Mary were killed in the massacre. 'We forgive those who come and do evil to us,' he says.



Christians at prayer in Dogo Nahawa.

we are left with nothing. Our clothes, our property, everything was burned.'

'Miraculous' escape

His wife and children were somehow spared. They fled the house and found a place to lie down. 'They escaped miraculously, even in the midst of the attackers,' he says.

His church, one of the two congregations in Dogo Nahawa belonging to the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN), lost many members on March 7. 'Five adults were killed, and fifteen children.'

Dogo Nahawa lost just over a quarter of its 1,200 population on March 7. It is estimated that the three neighbouring villages of Dogo Nahawa, Zot and Rastat together lost 500 people. Many are buried in an unmarked mass grave in the fields.

Yohana Gyang pastors the COCIN church on the other side of this small village. Two months after the massacre, the simple mud brick and tin-roofed building is packed with over 500 worshippers. Outside there are several hundred more.

Hundreds have come from outside this traumatised community to show their support: in cars, vans, taxis and by bicycle. There is an unspoken determination: 'this evil will not overcome us'.

Pastor Gyang describes what happened. 'When we were sleeping, we heard the shooting of guns, all over the village. We tried to come out, to try to escape.

'I lost my wife and my daughter. I lost many members in my church. They burned our church and my home. We lost many things in this village, motor cars, all food crops, they burned them all ... We lost many people.'

The pain of the previous events is etched deep in his face.

Yohana holds a large framed photograph of his wife Rose, taken on a formal occasion. From his few remaining possessions he retrieves a smaller colour print of his 18-year-old daughter Mary. His other three children, all grown up, survived and still live in the village.

'It is a painful time,' he says. 'I believe that Jesus Christ helps me because the Bible says that "If someone does wrong to you, forgive him." We forgive those who come and do evil to us.'

Yohana's congregation lost 40 people: 'children, men and women' he says.

Members Daniel Jik and his wife Dat lost six of their own children – as well as four of his brother's. Their grandson Gwom Chuang, 12, survived, but needed one month of hospital treatment for a machete wound.

Daniel himself fled when he heard the gunshots, and watched from a distance as his house was torched and his children butchered.

Naomi Dung lives near Daniel. She too recalls that night. Like the others, she and

Continued overleaf

An estimated 150 Muslims were then killed when a mob, widely described as Christian, attacked the village of Kuru Karama, 30km south of Jos. Christian leaders, however, dispute this, and say that Christians were also killed in the attack.¹

But nobody expected Dogo Nahawa and its neighbours to be the target of such violence – seen by many as a reprisal for previous attacks.

Pastor Bitrus ('Peter' in Hausa) stands inside the charred, roofless shell that was once his home.

'This is my house ... they burned it. They came after my wife, but she had already left with the children ... They went inside my bedroom and set fire,' he recalls, pointing to a small hole in the metal door. 'Before coming in they shot a bullet – they thought that somebody was behind the door.

'They just destroyed everything, and

¹ According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), the village head of Kuru Karama, a non-Muslim who fled the violence, said that non-Muslim houses and bodies were also among those shown in international media reports (CSW media release of March 8).

her husband Dung Gwom were woken by the sound of gunshots.

'My husband went out to see what was happening. He ran to the church, and he was killed.'

'The attackers were killing some children outside our house. My neighbour's children, four of them, ran into our house. All of them were saved.'

'I heard the Fulanis say: 'Burn this house!', 'Burn that house!', and 'leave this one!' So they left our house alone.'

'We have never before seen so many dead bodies.'

Naomi now cares for her five children, aged from five to seventeen, on her own. She is still scared for the future.

'We are still living in great fear. As I sit here now, I can still see them, in my mind, attacking us.'

'There is a rumour that the attackers have not finished with us, and are going to come back. On March the seventh they did not kill many men, and the rumour is that they are coming back for the men.'

Systematic attacks

The massacre had clearly been carefully planned.

'We have seen that these attacks are systematic, they are organised,' says the Archbishop of Jos, Benjamin Kwashi.

'[The attackers] knew where to cut. If you look at the cuts, you will see it, to inflict maximum pain and painful death, for men, for women, for children. That takes training.'

The assailants, who numbered around 400, also knew how to avoid the military curfew that is in place from 9pm each

evening, when only those with special passes may travel.

'They were able to beat down the curfew,' says Archbishop Kwashi. 'The state was in curfew, but they beat it. How did they know the routes, how did they get to beat military curfew? That is my point.'

Soldiers held back

Not only did the attackers manage to avoid the soldiers, but according to those we spoke to, it seems that the soldiers had been deliberately told to stand back from the villages on the night of the massacre.

COCIN Pastor Bitrus Daniel talked to one soldier who had heard the gunshots, and screams, of the attack. This soldier had urged his commanding officer to investigate what was happening, who in turn called the General Officer Commanding (GOC), Major General Saleh Maina.

The GOC allegedly told the soldiers not to intervene, and the soldier who had raised the question was beaten in the head with a rifle butt. 'They nearly killed him because they were about to shoot him,' says Pastor Bitrus.

'The soldiers didn't do anything. We have no confidence [in them].'

Another pastor, who asked not to be identified, confirms that the GOC knew of the attacks, but kept his soldiers back.

'I called the GOC. He is a Muslim. I called him, he didn't pick my phone, and I sent him a text. I said "there is a problem going on in Dogo Nahawa, people have been attacked, killed, please can you send the soldiers immediately to take care of the situation."



Daniel Jik (centre) with his wife Dat, and grandson Gwom Chuang, 12, who received hospital treatment for a machete wound. Daniel lost six of his children in the massacre, and four of his brother's children were also killed.

'After an hour he said "who are you?". I said "I am Pastor Xxxxx, please send people to defend these people. He didn't answer, he didn't say anything, he offered his phone."

While the Nigerian Government has yet to complete its own investigations into the massacre, it is said that some human rights groups inside and outside Nigeria have accused the GOC Major General Saleh Maina of crimes against humanity, and are preparing a case for the International Court of Justice in the Hague.

In the weeks following the massacre, individual Christians such as John Mwanti have been the victims of indiscriminate shooting by soldiers (see photo on page 8), and there have been alleged cases of extra-judicial killings.

Information war

The conflict in the Plateau is also a battle of accurate reporting.

'There is a war of information,' says one church leader. 'When the Hausa and Fulani



Two months after the massacre, this COCIN church in Dogo Nahawa is packed with hundreds of worshippers.



Muslims launch an attack on the Christian community, before anything, they will tell the local and international media that it is the Christians who launched an attack on them. And that is where we have real problems.'

For example, when in January the international media covered the riots in Jos, some of the first reports described the number of bodies that had been brought into Jos Central Mosque – with the implication that these were all Muslim victims.

The news agency AFP (Agence France-Presse) reported that mosque leader Balarabe Dawud had said that 192 bodies had been brought to the mosque on January 19, in addition to 26 reported the previous day. They also quoted mosque employee Mohammed Shittu as saying: 'the mosque is full with the injured and the dead.'²

This early report on the number of Muslim victims was also used by the BBC³, and circulated by many other media around the world.

However, the bodies in the mosque were never formally identified, and Christian leaders suspect that these also may have included Christian victims, who were deliberately taken into the mosque.

Yet, at a critical stage in the reporting of this event, these figures, which may well have been exaggerated, coloured how the Jos riots were reported both locally and internationally.

Church leaders in the Plateau have long felt that their cause has often been misrepresented in the media, with inaccurate reporting itself contributing to the cycle of violence and retaliation.

Release's partner Stefanos Foundation is trying to redress the balance, by engaging with journalists and others, and

documenting attacks against Christians.

'There has been misinformation going on in the media,' says Co-ordinator Mark Lipdo. 'We speak to government, to media and to religious freedom organisations. We are also trying to help leaders of the churches to understand the right way to respond.'

Some Christian leaders believe there is an Islamic agenda to take over the Plateau.

Rev Dr Pandang Yamsat is President of COCIN. 'Since 2001 about 20 pastors from my church, the Church of Christ in Nigeria, have been killed; about 150 churches have been destroyed.'

'The church on the Plateau has been under attack by Muslims, for the simple reason that they want to occupy the Plateau.

'Ninety, ninety-five per cent of the people on the Plateau are Christians, and they want to cripple that number ... so they

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² AFP report of January 19, 2010 *Nearly 300 killed in Nigeria religious clashes* ³ BBC News report of January 20, 2010, published on their website *200 dead' in Nigeria clashes*

Nvou is pictured with her six-year-old son Mafeng, in front of their house, which was repaired with support from Release.



'PRAY FOR US, SO WE CAN LIVE IN PEACE AGAIN'

Nvou Dauda, pictured above, was wounded during an attack by militants in December 2002, when she lost the child she was carrying. She received medical assistance from Release's partners Stefanos Foundation, which also later provided funds to re-roof her damaged house. She now has two children: a son Mafeng, aged six, and daughter Nirat, aged 3.

'In 2002 Fulani Muslims attacked our village. They came to my house and told me to open the door.

They forced their way in. They shot me in the hand, stomach and leg. I was taken to hospital.

The attackers killed a lot of people. Many were wounded, and many of our houses were burned.

When I was in hospital Stefanos Foundation helped pay for my medical bills, and when I came out they helped rebuild this house.

Since the recent attacks we are living in fear. There are many Fulani in this area. So at night we don't sleep in the house – we sleep in the bush.

Please pray for us, so that we can live in peace again.'

Release continues to support persecuted Christians in Plateau State by providing relief aid, medical care, practical support for widows and orphans, and help to start small businesses.



Nvou when she received medical treatment in 2002.

THE PLATEAU: LIVING ON A FAULT LINE

Jos, capital of Nigeria's central Plateau State, lies between the largely Islamic north, where 12 states have declared Sharia law, and the largely Christian south. This city of 500,000 is home to many Christian missions and denominations. Since 2001 it has been caught in a cycle of sporadic inter-communal violence. Underlying causes include competition for resources, such as land, and the struggle for political power.

- **September 2001:** Up to 1,000 people are killed in Jos after Muslims attack Christians, apparently after a young woman was said to have crossed a Muslim praying ground at the time of prayer.
- **November 2008:** Two days of rioting in Jos leave over 400 injured and 381 killed. 70 churches are burned. The riots are supposedly caused by the local election results in Jos North – even though these results had not been declared.
- **January 2010:** At least 200 people are killed in Jos, and over 5,000 are displaced, following unprovoked attacks on Christians by youths supposedly working on a building site. A mob attacks the Fulani Muslim settlement of Kuru Karama, 30km south of Jos, leaving 150 dead.
- **March 2010:** Over 500 are massacred in the nearby villages of Dogo Nahawa, Zot and Rastat.



Christian John Mwanti was shot by soldiers who opened fire indiscriminately on a group of youths in Tahoss village on April 20.

will become the majority and thereby gain control.

'If they gain control, they will then begin to introduce Islamic law.'

The Archbishop of Jos Benjamin Kwashi describes the situation as a continuing 'crisis'.

'Since 1994 there has been steady, calculated persecution of Christians, the climax of which is this year 2010. Many hundreds of lives have been lost.'

In fact since 2001 about 56,000 people have been killed on the Plateau, both Christians and Muslims.

Criminality

'The Government is unable to arrest and punish people for their crimes,' says the Archbishop.

'Criminality has become a good business: looting, destroying, killing ... People have not been arrested, they've not been jailed, so criminality has become a business ...

'It is the Christian church on the Plateau which is paying with its blood.'

Stefanos Foundation's Mark Lipdo describes the widespread failure of the Nigerian justice system to convict the perpetrators of violence as part of a 'culture of corruption' that threatens Nigeria's very constitution and unity.⁴

'Nigeria today has the finest law in the whole of the world,' he says, 'but the problem is the enforcement of such law. The reason is that a "culture of corruption" has come in, which has weakened enforcement.

'This is why with all the crises that have been happening in the north, and now it's beginning to even happen in Plateau State, there is hardly anybody brought to book within our judicial system.'

PLEASE PRAY

The Archbishop of Jos urges Christians to keep on praying for the Plateau.

'My appeal to Christians worldwide to pray for us in Plateau State is firstly to pray that the federal, the state and the local governments be empowered, be supported to provide security for Muslims, for Christians ... for all the citizens of Plateau State.

'I'm also praying that through these difficult times that God will restrain Christians from acting foolishly, from thinking of revenge, from taking retaliation and from doing things that will not glorify

God. So I ask the church to pray for us.

'Christians on the Plateau must not lose focus on the vision and mission of the church: to bring good to all people, to bring health to all people, and to demonstrate the love of God and the love of the Lord Jesus Christ to all humanity.

Pray too for reconciliation and healing between the different communities in Plateau State. 'I know as of fact of many Christian religious, political and community leaders who are willing and prepared peacefully to arrive at workable conditions for people to live with,' says the Archbishop. 'I also know as of fact that there are Muslim religious, political and community leaders who are willing to find solutions.'

Despite the extreme and painful difficulties in the Plateau, Archbishop Kwashi is undaunted in his desire for a widespread revival of the Christian faith.

'We are also asking for a revival, because I believe very strongly that God wants to do a major spiritual revival in missions - and I pray to God that it begins in Jos.'

PLEASE GIVE

Please support Release's ongoing ministry to stand with persecuted Christians in Nigeria and around the world. You may make a financial gift by using the back-page coupon, via our secure web page www.releaseinternational.org/donate, or by calling our Supporter Relations Team on 01689 823491.



Capital: **Abuja**
Population: **135 million**
Government: **Federal republic**
Religion: **Christian 47%; Muslim 42%; Ethnoreligionist 10.5 %**⁵

Since gaining independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria has been beset by military coups. The national government presides over a federation of 36 states and a melting pot of more than 250 ethnic groups. It faces the huge challenge of uniting a nation strongly divided along ethnic and religious lines.

Freedom of religion is enshrined in Nigeria's constitution which declares it to be a secular state. Yet hardline Islamists seem bent on turning Nigeria into a Muslim nation.

Twelve states in the north of Nigeria have adopted Sharia (Islamic law) since 1999: in many instances, Sharia is applied to all citizens, not just Muslims. The result has been communal clashes for which religion is often the trigger - and in which thousands of people have died.



Burned-out cars still litter the streets of Dogo Nahawa. Photo: Stefanos Foundation.

NEW NIGERIA DVD

Release is producing a new DVD about the massacre at Dogo Nahawa and the pressures facing Christians in Plateau State. The 10-minute DVD 'We forgive' features many of those described here and will be available for order in our next edition.

⁴ Stefanos Foundation has documented cases of religious discrimination and violence against Christians in *Religious Intolerance: a threat to Nigeria's unity*, January 2010 ⁵ Ethnoreligionist is a collective term for primal or primitive animists, spirit-worshippers, shamanists, pantheists, fetishists etc usually confined to a single tribe or people.

Prayer, praise and perseverance

Release's Prisoners of Faith Manager Colin describes how three very different Christians, all imprisoned for their faith in Christ, learned how to overcome through the power of prayer and praise.



Helen Berhane

Helen Berhane in her book *Song of the Nightingale*, shares with us something of her experiences during her imprisonment in a 20ft shipping container together with other Eritrean Christian women.

'When he had locked us in and left, many of the women were furious and upset and began to complain and cry... I encouraged everyone to sit on the floor in a circle and I began to speak to them. "Remember that the walls of Jericho came down because of praises. If we keep complaining we cannot win. Instead we must continue to pray, praise and sing. Satan wants to use discouraging words as a weapon against us, so we must continue to praise God in all circumstances."

What is it that brings the presence of God tangibly near and gives strength to persevere in the midst of almost intolerable suffering?

Our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ bear vivid testimony to Jehovah Shammah, 'the Lord is there'. Their declaration of the truth about God and their joy in expressing the worth of their Lord and Saviour in their praises secure his promised presence (see Matthew 28:19-20).

This is a profound truth known also by evangelist Stephen, who is currently serving a ten-year prison sentence in northern Vietnam.

Geoffrey T. Bull

Geoffrey T. Bull was born in England in 1921. In March 1947, having trusted in Christ as a child, Bull and his co-worker, George Patterson, responded to the missionary call and sailed for China.

Towards the end of three years of intensive language study, they moved into the borderland of Tibet to learn the culture and religion of the people to whom God had called them. At that time, the Chinese Communist forces took control of Tibet. Geoffrey Bull witnessed the last days of Tibetan independence and was imprisoned for more than three years.

For the first year he was kept in solitary confinement in a tiny cell where he had hardly enough room to turn around, and was threatened with execution almost daily. Through it all, he encouraged himself in the Lord through Scripture verses he had memorised as a youth and by singing some of his favorite hymns.

In his book *God Holds the Key* he recalls:

'I had no Bible in my hand, no watch on my wrist, no pencil or paper in my pocket. There was no real hope of release. There was no real hope of life. There was no real possibility of

reunion with those I loved. The only reality was my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Divested of all, He was to become everything to me... He would let me hear His voice... and I would come to worship Him... To see the King in His beauty must be our one desiring; to hunger, thirst and take our fill of Him... Oh! to have such a sense of the Lord's abiding presence!'



Missionary Geoffrey Bull was imprisoned by the Chinese communists after leader Mao Zedong (pictured above) took control of Tibet.

'You can beat me for as long as you like, you can imprison me for ten years if you like, but I know who I believe in!'

Vietnamese evangelist Stephen

Stephen's story

Stephen (not his real name) was first arrested in 2002 when he was 32. He was placed in solitary confinement and brutally beaten for three months. The authorities said: 'We want you to tell the truth, but we will tell you what the truth is!'

He replied: 'You can beat me for as long as you like, you can imprison me for ten years if you like, but I know who I believe in!'

After each beating, the guards threw Stephen back into his cell where he would always kneel down and begin praising and singing hymns to God. Stephen's trust was in God and despite the constant beatings his joy never left him. Many times the bruises from his beatings would miraculously disappear overnight. The testimony of his unwavering faith shocked the guards who asked him: 'After all these beatings how can you still praise your God?'

Stephen never denied his Saviour. After completing three months of interrogation, he was asked: 'Is there anything you want to say?' Stephen said: 'I give thanks to God for giving me the opportunity to come here to preach the Gospel to you because you don't believe in God yet. Every day you interrogate me, I see it as an opportunity to explain God's Word to you.'

'It doesn't matter what you want to do with me,' he continued. 'Keep me in prison as long as you like. I want to preach the Gospel here in prison because nobody else is here to do it.' The authorities replied: 'Because you are so pig-headed, we will transfer you to a prison in the North.'

'Praise the Lord!' exclaimed Stephen. 'You have answered my prayers. I've been praying about how I can bring the Gospel to the North and now God has made a way.'

The authorities threw their hands in the air and said: 'Argue your case with the judge.'

IN COURT

As he waited for his court hearing, Stephen believed that whatever happened was part of God's plan for his life. He was aware and thankful for the support and prayers of many Christians. For two hours the judge and prosecutor argued with Stephen. Finally they announced: 'We sentence you to ten years imprisonment'. Stephen responded: 'Praise God.'

On March 3, 2004, he was transported to a prison in North Vietnam. His cell held 56 inmates. Although many had been



Christians, most had abandoned their faith.

When Stephen asked: 'Who will kneel with me and pray to God?', they replied: 'We are in prison, why should we pray?'

Only three prisoners joined him in prayer and they decided they would fast on the 14th day of each month. Before long, six more believers joined their prayer meetings. The men began to see Stephen as a leader sent by God and under his pastoral care many stopped smoking and gambling.

BIBLES BANNED

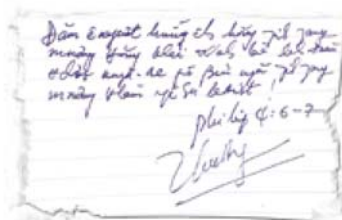
In Vietnamese prisons, Bibles are banned because the communists regard God's Word as poisonous propaganda. This didn't stop Stephen and his brothers in Christ. They developed a simple but effective plan. Stephen told his brothers: 'Whoever remembers a Bible verse, write it down then give it to me. Together we can build our own Bible from the verses we remember.'

As an example, Stephen wrote one of his favourite verses:

'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 4:6-7).

The believers read this special handwritten 'prison Bible' and shared it with the other prisoners. Some believers had backslidden, but the power of God's Word compelled them to confess their sins and repent before the Lord.

Knowing that the authorities did not permit prisoners to hold prayer meetings,



some believers were afraid they would receive further punishment if they agreed to join with Stephen. However, Stephen counselled them and said: 'If the guards or authorities inquire about the meetings, tell them that it is not political and that we are simply thanking and praising God together. If there are any problems, then I alone will be responsible.'

ILLEGAL PREACHING

When the prison authorities found out about the meetings, they shouted at Stephen, reminding him of the crime he was committing: 'You're charged with illegally preaching the Gospel in this prison!'

Stephen replied: 'That is impossible as everyone here is a believer! We are simply learning the Word of God. You lock us down at 5.30 pm each day and then it is our own time and we can pray freely.'

In December 2004 Stephen asked the prison warden: 'As you know, we are Christians and December 25 is a very special day for us. May we have your permission to buy some food and have a meal together to celebrate this special time?'

The prison warden agreed and a special Christmas lunch was arranged. Stephen, in charge of the main course, presented the Christmas story from Luke 2:11: 'Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.'

Prisoners and guards alike were present, so Stephen fearlessly challenged them to repent and several men put their faith in Christ.

HELP US SUPPORT MORE CHRISTIAN PRISONERS OF FAITH

Release's Prisoners of Faith ministry currently supports Stephen and more than 100 other Christian prisoners of faith in Vietnam by providing pastoral encouragement, help for the families of prisoners, and Bibles and Christian literature.

We'd like to support more prisoners like Stephen.

You can help this vital work to grow by giving regularly. Please call our Supporter Relations Team on 01689 823491 to set up a standing order.

In return we'll send you regular information about how your giving is benefiting Christian prisoners around the world.

WOMEN IN OUR HEARTS



Maryam and Marzieh

Unsung heroines

We rejoice at the fantastic news that the two Iranian Christian women Maryam and Marzieh were acquitted of all charges against them on May 22. Thank you for your prayers.

However, both were warned that if they continued their Christian activities there would be 'severe consequences'. Both therefore left Iran immediately and are now safe in another country.

Maryam said: 'I believe our arrest, imprisonment and subsequent release were (...) all for His glory. But the prayers of people encouraged and sustained us throughout this ordeal.'

The two women, both raised as Muslims, were arrested in March 2009 and charged with 'apostasy' and 'propagating Christianity'.

It is so important to realise that their ordeal was like many other Christian women who suffer persecution because of their faith, but whose names and stories will never be publicised. They suffer for the name of Jesus and His glory, remaining 'unsung heroines' of the faith but nevertheless precious daughters in God's sight.

Let us be spurred on to pray for all of our suffering sisters in Christ – both the sisters whose stories, photos and names we know intimately and also those whose names and situations are ultimately known only by our Father. May they be strengthened in all situations to glorify Jesus, who has been given by God the 'Name above all names' before whom every knee will bow.

release
women

WOMEN IN THE WORD

Unnamed – But not insignificant

2 Kings 4:1-7

'The unnamed widow of one of the prophets approached Elisha: "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the Lord. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves". Elisha replied to her: "How can I help you?"

How easy it would have been for the widow to ask Elisha for a loan, to pay her debt or to speak to the creditor on her behalf. But Elisha asks: "What do you have in your house?" - for part of her solution was to give what she had.

The widow had nothing. As a prophet's wife she would have had status, but now she had nothing but a little oil – an important commodity for cooking, heating, lighting and healing.

"Go around and ask all your neighbours for empty jars."

Elisha requested that she take a step of courage in humility, for jars were valuable for collecting water and for storage. It would have taken generous neighbours to give away jars in anticipation they may not get them back. Perhaps some never gave.

On her return she was told to shut the door. The demonstration of her faith in pouring the little oil was private for the widow and her sons; the effect would become public later when she sold the abundant provision of oil, returned the jars and paid her creditor.

Many of our sisters have lost husbands, status, income and even children for Jesus' sake. They are often left with nothing but a 'little oil', showing great courage, humility and faith.

We are their neighbours – our prayers and encouragement are like the jars to be filled with oil, which will multiply into our sisters' lives and spill over to their neighbours for God's glory. Let us be diligent in supporting our unnamed but not insignificant sisters.

Supporter Margaret Knight

WOMEN IN THE UK

Flickering light

Margaret Evans organises a candle-lit supper in her church to raise funds for Release: women

The article in *Release* magazine about North Korea had caught my attention, and the phrase 'Those without food must eat grass and catch frogs' disturbed my thoughts.

How do we reconcile our more privileged lives with such suffering?

I prepared a poster for the Persecuted Church Notice board, with an unspoken prayer: 'Please Lord, help me do something.'

We organised a candle-lit supper, to be held at the church, inviting other churches in the area. Not knowing the exact numbers, we set six tables of eight and exactly forty-eight people came!

After the meal we watched a DVD about North Korea and heard stories of the suffering. Then we shared in the breaking of bread to remember our oneness with them in Christ.

The flickering candles reminded us that the light of the love of Christ will never be extinguished.

COME TO OUR CONFERENCE

Release: Women is having a special heart2heart conference on November 13, 2010, in Nottingham with guest speaker former Eritrean prisoner and author Helen Berhane. Please book this date in your diaries now.

More events are planned for Release: Women in Scotland and Northern Ireland. For further details please contact Linda in Scotland (01294 602674) or Florence in the Belfast office (028 9334 0014).

Each year Release funds dozens of projects around the world, providing practical help to persecuted Christians in the name of Jesus. Thanks to your financial giving, Release has been able to support these two projects to help children at risk from persecution.



Right: The bamboo hut that the Siansiam children live in currently. Far right: How the new home will look. Top: Some of the children who will benefit – thanks to your support
Photos: Kids Alive.



SRI LANKA

'A GREAT COMFORT'

Education of pastors' children

Funds allocated: £10,750

Thanks to your giving, Release has continued to support up to 150 pastors' children, providing funding for tuition fees so they may complete their education.

This project is a great comfort to the children and their parents, but it will also bring long-term benefits to the church in Sri Lanka. Significantly it is the pastors in rural settings, especially those who live in strongly Buddhist areas, who face the most persecution and have the greatest needs.

Many pastors simply cannot afford to provide for their children's education. One parent said: 'We are very grateful... for all the help provided... It's a great help as we find it very difficult to supply the needs for my son's education.'

'Thank you so much for all the help you have given me'

Many children in rural areas attend free Buddhist schools provided by the state. However, Christian children are often isolated and bullied, and in some areas a Christian child might even be refused education. Sadly these children see first-hand the persecution of their family and friends, but this project encourages them to realise they are part of a wider family in Christ and to rejoice in the financial support given by their Christian brothers and sisters in the UK and Ireland.

One encouraged child said: 'Thank you so much for all the help you have given me. This scholarship helps my education immensely and may God bless you for all the good work you are doing.'

BURMA

GROWING UP WITH DIGNITY

Support for children's home • Funds allocated: £19,500

Some of the funds raised from our 2009 Christmas project have been put towards building a new home for children from the Chin region, where Christians face persecution. According to our partner's Project Director 'the perfect piece of land' has been bought and the boundary walls have now been built.

The Siansiam Home (meaning 'the one whom God takes care of') will care for 12 children, many of whom are orphans or have been rescued from Buddhist temples. The new home will replace a rented bamboo hut which currently provides inadequate living conditions for the children.

Our partner Kids Alive says: 'It is such a fantastic work and the money we receive... has such a huge impact. We have endeavoured to improve our homes to give the kids the best care we can by constructing toilets, kitchens and bathrooms, and where necessary, building new homes in which our kids can grow healthily and with dignity.' The children also receive a good education at the nearby Kids Alive day school.

Release allocated £12,000 to the new home, and £7,500 to buy mattresses, pillows, blankets and mosquito nets for a number of homes.

If you would like to make a financial gift to help us stand with persecuted Christians, please use the back-page coupon of this magazine. Thank you.



EGYPT

Mohammed Hegazy 'devastated' by delay tactics



Mohammed Hegazy

An Egyptian Christian branded an apostate for leaving Islam is 'devastated' by a court decision to suspend his legal battle to change his religion on his identity card.

Mohammed Hegazy has had his case suspended until the Constitutional Court rules on a separate legal challenge to a section of the civil code which, in theory, allows Egyptians to change the religion listed on their ID card.

Mohammed says that delaying a judgment in his case will only prolong the uncertainty and danger surrounding his family, including his two children: Mariam, two, and baby Yousef.

The 27-year-old, who lives in hiding, has suffered severe persecution, including imprisonment, since he became a Christian in 1998.

The persecution intensified in 2007 when he began his legal battle to change his religion to 'Christian' on his ID papers in a high-profile suit. The court ruled against him and he is currently appealing against that judgment.

Currently, the Egyptian Government lists both Mohammed's children as 'Muslim' – so they too would be considered 'apostates' if they chose to embrace Christianity. The Compass Direct news agency reports that this latest court ruling could delay a decision in his case 'for several years'.

'You cannot imagine how hard the struggle is for converts to be Christian at home, yet Muslim elsewhere,' he told Release.

• **Pray for protection for Mohammed and his family who continue to live in hiding.**

Read news about persecuted Christians on our website www.releaseinternational.org/news



Gao Zhisheng

CHINA

Christian lawyer Gao 'disappears' again

Beijing lawyer Gao Zhisheng has disappeared again, just days after security officials apparently freed him at the end of a 13-month detention.

Gao, a Christian human rights lawyer, has been missing since April 20 and is 'definitely in the hands of security forces', according to Release partner China Aid.

After his release on April 6 Gao was allowed to return home to Beijing and later to visit his in-laws in Urumqi, Xinjiang province. But four police officers accompanied him to his relatives' home and allowed him just one night there. Gao promised to call his in-laws on his return home to Beijing – but never did.

China Aid believes that the Chinese authorities allowed Gao a brief re-appearance to prove he was still alive – but have seized him again to stop him speaking about his treatment in custody, when he was held incommunicado.

Gao, who was tortured by security police in 2007, refused to discuss his recent detention at a press conference on April 7, saying only that he 'no longer had the strength' to continue his legal work.

• **Pray that Gao stays in good health, and that his family finds out where he is being held.**

Gao... is 'definitely in the hands of security forces'

INDIA

Hindu nationalists plan 'reconversion' event

Hindu nationalist organisations in Madhya Pradesh state have declared their intention to rid Mandla district of all Christian influence and are preparing a large 'reconversion' event for next year, reports the news agency Compass Direct.

A similar event in Dangs district, Gujarat state, in 2006 was filled with anti-Christian speech.

Hindu leaders reportedly announced a list of objectives to be achieved before the festival, due to be held in February 2011. One aim, they say, is to drive away Christian pastors, evangelists and foreign aid workers from the district.

A week after this declaration, around 40 Hindu nationalists from the *Bajrang Dal* militant organisation surrounded the home of Pastor Bhag Chand Rujhiya during a house church service and accused him of forced conversion as they shouted anti-Christian slogans.

Using abusive language, they pelted his house with stones as about 60 people were attending a worship service, Pastor Rakesh Dass said.

'The mob was carrying deadly weapons like knives and rods,' he said.

Police forced the pastor and his wife to sign statements that they would no longer lead Sunday worship or pray with friends or relatives inside their house, and that they would not evangelise again in the area.

• **Pray for Pastor Bhag Chand Rujhiya and his family, and other Christians in Madhya Pradesh as they face increasing Hindu nationalism.**

LAOS

Expelled Christians suffer poor health

Despite assurances of religious rights by officials in March, Lao Christians expelled from a village in Saravan Province in January are suffering from prolonged lack of adequate food and clean water.

Poor conditions have led to diarrhoea, dehydration, eye and skin infections, fainting and general weakness for the Christians expelled from Katin village, and one person has died, Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF) reports.

A Christian who went by the name of Ampheng died suddenly in April while praying for Christians who were hospitalised with illnesses caused by their living conditions, an HRWLRF spokesman said. The cause of Ampheng's death is not known.

Expelled from their village at gunpoint on January 18 for failing to renounce their faith, the 48 Christians were forced to build temporary shelters at the edge of the jungle, nearly four miles from their village.

Katin's village chief recently warned other residents that their personal possessions would be confiscated and their homes torn down if they had any contact with the expelled Christians.

• Pray that God will strengthen and heal these families who are suffering.



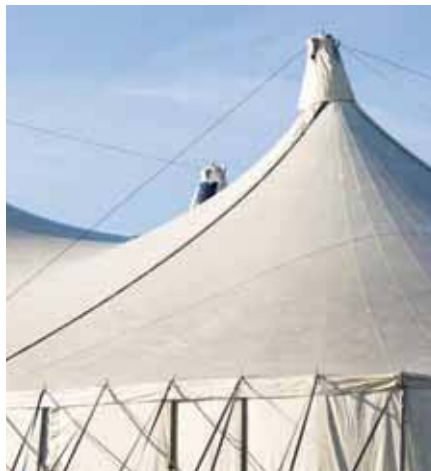
NEW LOOK FOR WEBSITE

Release has recently updated our website www.releaseinternational.org, which is packed with information about our ministry to serve persecuted Christians around the world.

The site includes video and radio reports, topical news and prayer items, as well as many resources that can be downloaded free of charge, such as our Advocates' Pack.

You can also use the website to donate securely to Release, to order resources from our eStore and to visit our release:potential youth website.

Pray that God will strengthen and heal these families who are suffering.



SUMMER EVENTS

If you're planning to attend any of these Summer events, we'd love to meet you.

Please look out for the Release stand, and take a look at our latest resources.

New Wine

Sligo July 11-16
Shepton Mallet July 24-August 7
Newark July 31-August 6

CLAN Gathering

Madras College, St Andrews, Fife
July 24-30

Keswick Convention

Keswick
July 24-August 6

Soul Survivor

Stafford July 30-August 2
Shepton Mallet August 11-20

Momentum

Shepton Mallet August 21-25

Grapevine

Lincolnshire Showground
August 27-31

Find out more at www.releaseinternational.org/events

RELEASE NATIONAL CONFERENCE

Come to our one-day National Conference in London on Saturday, November 6, and hear the author and former Eritrean prisoner Helen Berhane. Other key speakers include Release patron Martin Goldsmith and Godfrey Yogarajah, head of the World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission. Don't miss out! See page 19 for further details.

IN BRIEF

CHINA: Sixteen senior house church leaders from different provinces who were detained on May 5 while meeting for prayer and Bible study have been released following international pressure, reports Release's partner China Aid.

INDIA: A church under construction in Anantpur, Andhra Pradesh, was demolished on May 23 by Hindu radicals. According to the Global Council of Indian Christians, the church was destroyed by members of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), despite the fact that the church had secured all necessary permits.

IRAN: Two church leaders from a Muslim background, who were arrested in Isfahan on February 28, were released in May. Hamid and Reyhaneh, who lead a house fellowship, were detained after 20 police officers raided their home, confiscated personal possessions and threatened other believers.

NIGERIA: Two churches belonging to the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA), a Baptist Church, and a pastor's house have been demolished by Fulani youths in Kano State, northern Nigeria, after a few members of the Muslim community objected to their existence. The ECWA pastor is now in hiding, after some youths vowed they would not leave the area until he was dead.

PAKISTAN: A Christian woman who was kidnapped, forced to marry a Muslim farmer and told to convert to Islam amid a dispute over a loan has managed to escape after weeks of 'captivity and torture'. Sania James, 33, was kidnapped on April 5 by armed men who stormed her parent's house in the small town of Rawat, just outside Rawalpindi.

SOMALIA: Members of the Islamic extremist group *al-Shabaab* killed an underground church leader in Xarardheere, Mudug region, on May 4. The extremists, who were battling a rival rebel group for control of the area, were searching for enemy fighters when they discovered 57-year-old Yusuf Ali Nur, a school teacher and underground church leader.

'run thru' every obstacle



I never thought I'd be stuck face down in the middle of an obstacle course, wearing a padded sumo suit, with my colleague Emma stepping on me in order to win a race - no mercy!

I eventually made it out of the course, albeit minus a gold hoop earring and a little bit red-faced. I would assume that to onlookers I would have resembled an overweight pirate. But this didn't seem to put people off and despite my dishevelled appearance many people still wanted to RUN THRU our 40ft inflatable obstacle course!

We were taking part in London's fantastic Pentecost Festival, which now spans nearly a week of events and activities, including music, drama, comedy, prayer, discussions and ... our RUN THRU obstacle course.



Josh from Release was one of the fastest contenders and so all the guys wanted to race him (he was the one to beat), equally it seemed that all the girls wanted to race me because they had seen my earlier performance and fancied their chances at a win!

There was a lot of laughing, running, jumping and falling and although we had a lot of fun we also managed to speak to people about WHY we were holding the RUN THRU event.

We explained that we hoped to highlight the very real and serious issue of Christian persecution by challenging people to persevere as they faced our obstacle course.

Our special T-shirts read 'RUN THRU James 1:12' and this particular verse is:

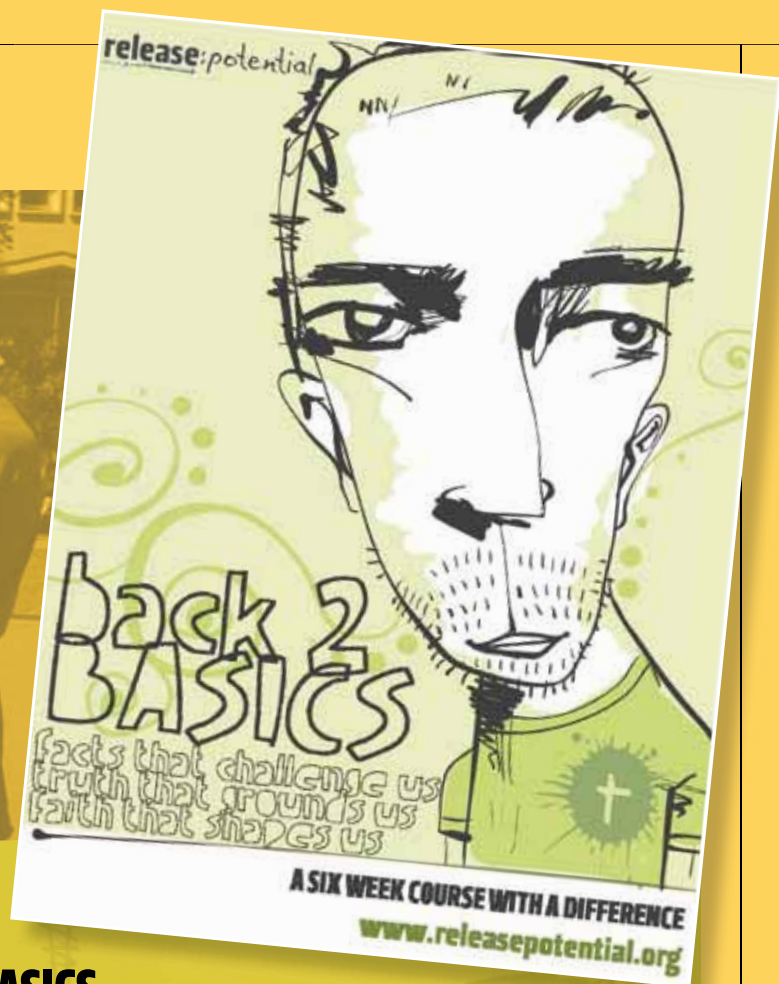
'Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him.'

Christians who persevere against all the obstacles, whether in the UK and Ireland, or in Eritrea, Nigeria or Pakistan, are promised 'the crown of life'. Let's not forget it.

We received hundreds of signatures for our Pakistan: Let Justice Flow petition and had some great conversations with Christians and non-Christians in London's Victoria Embankment Gardens.

If you were there then we'd like to say a big 'thank you' for your support and enthusiasm, and if you weren't there, then why not? You really missed out! We hope to see all of you next time we hold a RUN THRU event! We'll let you know when.

Carina



BACK 2 BASICS

Watch out for our free six-week course for youth groups, Back2Basics! We discuss what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in the UK today and how we can learn from the amazing faith of our persecuted brothers and sisters. The course is fun, challenging and interactive, and includes a DVD of release:potential's trip to meet Christians in Pakistan. Check out the website if you want to know more www.releasepotential.org/b2b-flyer. Available soon.

summer fun

Also come and see us at Soul Survivor festival Weeks A, B, C and Momentum and get your battle paint on! More photos, prayer points and chats to be had this summer - we look forward to seeing you there!

To add your name to the Pakistan: Let Justice Flow petition simply visit www.releaseinternational.org and follow the links.

Check out photos and videos of the day at www.releasepotential.org/pentecostevent



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