

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

JAN-MAR 2019

voice

of Persecuted Christians

OPPRESSION

Why Christians
in restricted
nations continue
to suffer

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2019



Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

Helping Christians under oppression

According to the current report on religious restrictions around the world by the Washington-based non-partisan Pew Research Centre, 'In 2016, Christians were harassed in 144 countries, up from 128 countries the year before.' This includes harassment by both governments (114 countries) and social groups (107 countries).¹

The report defines government harassment to include 'a government offence against a religious group or person due to their religious identity, including physical coercion or being singled out with the intent of making life or religious practice more difficult.'

This edition of our quarterly magazine focuses on how Christians face oppression and discrimination – simply because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

On pages 11-14 you can read brief reports from some of our key partners who confirm this growing trend of harassment by both governments and social groups in many nations.

In **China**, for example, 2018 witnessed a sharp increase in government opposition to religion, including Christianity. In **Iran** another partner notes: 'There is a campaign to try to stop the

spread of Christianity, to arrest those who are leading house churches and those involved in evangelism and teaching.'

In this edition we also report on specific examples of how Christians continue to face persecution in **India** (page 6), **Egypt** (page 18) and **Pakistan** (page 9).

We rejoice at the long-awaited acquittal of blasphemy-accused Asia Bibi in Pakistan in October. Yet today many of the estimated 4.5 million Christians in Pakistan fear that an increasing number view every Christian as a blasphemer or blasphemer-in-waiting, whose continued existence can no longer be tolerated.

These Christians wonder: if someone with the profile of Asia is not safe, what will happen to us?

Despite these pressures, churches in many restricted nations continue to grow in size and depth of maturity.

In 2019, will you join us in bold prayer and compassionate action so that the Christian gospel may bear eternal fruit – even in the most oppressive environments?

¹ See releaseinternational.org/pew

Are you ready for a Challenge?

Take part in one of this year's UltraChallenge walking events – and raise funds for persecuted believers at the same time.

Step out in the Peak District, North Downs, South Coast or Thames Path: find out more on page 23.



Faith under fire



Keep praying for Eritrea

Twen (pictured) has now spent 13 years behind bars in Eritrea.

Despite having suffered brutal treatment this young woman, who is described as a 'precious, lovely Christian' by those who know her, is more concerned about others than for her own wellbeing.

We recently managed through contacts to find out how she is doing in prison and how we could pray for her. Her reply was simple yet deeply humbling: she said she had only one prayer request – that God would be glorified in Eritrea!

Find out more about Twen at releaseinternational.org.

• **Thank you Father God for your remarkable daughter Twen. May she know Your presence every day.**



From left: Shine, Jeet and Regi.

Indian pastors beaten by mob

Jeet, Regi and Shine work in southern Bihar state, in the north of India, where they are involved in a network of around 30 churches.

Last summer they were part of an outreach team that went to a village to show a Christian film. 'Some people there were opposed to us,' Regi told Release. 'They told us not to show the film.'

The pastors decided to comply and began packing up their equipment. However, as they were leaving the village they were attacked by a group

of about 25 masked Hindu extremists, who began beating them.

'They told us they would kill us. We had materials and tracts with us, so they accused us of [forcibly] converting people,' Regi added.

But reflecting on the incident Shine said: 'We weren't angry. By the grace of God we had peace in our minds. We were happy to have the opportunity to share in something of what Jesus suffered for us.'

Read more about the pressures facing Christians in India on page 6.

• **Pray that Christians in India will stand for their faith, despite continuing opposition**

Crackdown on evangelism in China



Members of the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, Sichuan province, are continuing to preach on the streets, despite government opposition.

Officials detained 10 Christians in November for evangelising in public.

The believers were taken into custody as they handed out Christian fliers during a Bible study and were not released until the following day at 2:30 am. At the police station, national security officers and personnel from the local religious affairs department interrogated them.

Christians from the church prayed: 'May we preach the Word and God's sovereignty in tough times.'

In October officials detained 20 members of the church for carrying out street evangelism and for worshipping in a public park.

• **Pray that China's Christians will remain courageous in their faith and that our recent petition would be successful in calling on China to repeal draconian religious legislation.**

Iranian Christians detained



Two Christian converts from Islam planning to meet in a northern city of Iran were detained by security officials in November.

Behnam Ersali and Davood Rasooli, both of Karaj, were arrested before they were scheduled to meet in Mashhad, according to Release partner Middle East Concern (MEC). It is believed that Iranian intelligence intercepted calls between the two men to learn of their plan to meet.

'It reveals how closely the Iranian authorities are monitoring Christians,' said MEC.

Ersali, a former member of the

Assemblies of God church in Tehran, had travelled to Mashhad and was arrested at his friend's home. Six plain-clothes officers entered the home without legal permission. Ersali remains detained and his whereabouts are unknown.

Rasooli was arrested outside his home in Karaj by two plain-clothes officers. Friends believe that he is in solitary confinement and undergoing interrogation in Rajai Shahr Prison.

• Pray for God's strengthening power and wisdom for these two men, and that they will be released soon.

Uzbek police raid meeting

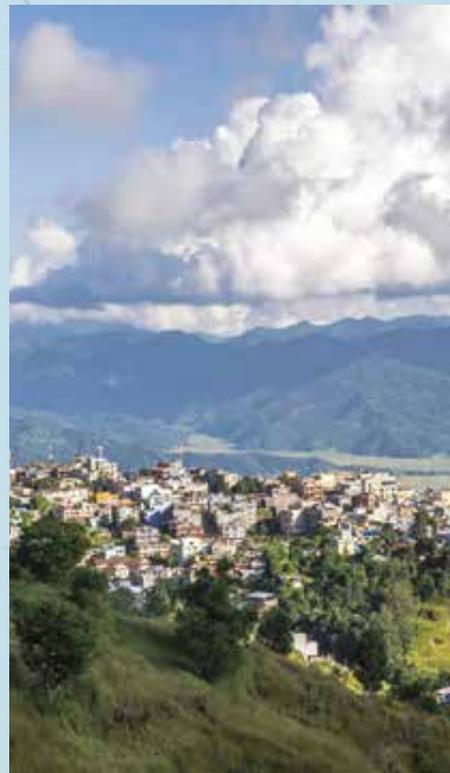
Police in Pap in the eastern Namangan Region of Uzbekistan raided a group of eight evangelical Christians who were having a meal together and reading the Bible.

Police and other officials searched the flat illegally without a search warrant and confiscated three Russian-language Bibles, one Uzbek-language Bible, a Bible commentary, booklets and Christian DVDs and CDs. All of the confiscated literature had been bought from the state-registered Bible Society of Uzbekistan.

Police arrested all eight believers and took them to Pap Police Station, where they were questioned until 3am the next day.

Uzbekistan imposes total censorship of all printed and electronic religious literature, but police even confiscate items that have passed the state's compulsory censorship.

• Pray that Christians in Uzbekistan will know the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit.



Nepalese church forced to close

High-caste Hindus who were harassing a church in Nepal have forced them to stop meeting – even in private homes.

Brahmins, the highest caste from which Hindu priests and teachers are drawn, had disrupted worship at the Pakhluwa Eternal Life Church in Palpa district, western Nepal – and accused pastor Tufani Bhar of forcibly converting villagers.

Although church members had abandoned their building and were meeting in private homes, the Brahmins issued threats to anyone from the congregation.

'It is shocking that we are not allowed to meet in homes and pray,' said Pastor Bhar.

Having established the church about a year ago, Pastor Bhar said he tried everything possible to preserve the fellowship but was unable to withstand the opposition.

• Pray that God will encourage Pastor Bhar and church members in Palpa.

THROWN FROM A MOVING TRAIN

Release's Kenneth Harrod recently visited India to meet pastors who are facing growing oppression, intimidation and violence because of their bold faith in Jesus Christ.

Pastor Suryadev climbed aboard the crowded train with a rucksack that felt awkward and heavy. It was full of Gideon's Bibles, and he was on his way to a meeting in northern India to distribute them. He never got there.

As passengers jostled for space the zip on his bag broke and several Bibles fell to the carriage floor. A few people picked up copies and asked him what they were.

Enthusiastically he replied: *'They are good news! If you want to, you can keep one!'*

Although some did, there were some young Hindu nationalists on the train who, when they realised what the Bibles were, began shouting: *'These people [Christians] are spoiling our religion!'*

'The Lord saved my life. My Lord was with me; he is the reason I am alive now.'

They violently threw him from the train, which was moving at the time. He was later found unconscious on the concrete platform, having suffered a fractured skull, shoulder bone and ankle. He lost several teeth in the fall.

Release staff met up with Suryadev several months after this traumatic incident. Although he can remember little about what happened after being thrown out of the train, he said: *'The Lord saved my life. My Lord was with me; he is the reason I am alive now.'*

Suryadev was speaking after a Release-sponsored pastors' conference, run by our partner in India. The conferences provide

biblical teaching, encouragement, fellowship and advice on Christians' rights under the Indian constitution.

Suryadev ministers in several villages, and continues to experience opposition to the gospel from Hindu extremists. *'Many people are coming to church – but they are afraid,'* he said. *'But when you give your life to the Lord, He is with you. He is in control of our lives.'*

Opposition to the gospel from an aggressive, increasingly bold Hindu nationalist movement continues to grow in India, despite the country having a constitution which grants freedom not only to practise but to propagate religion.

Many pastors have testimonies of being threatened and beaten; of being accused of coercing people to convert; of seeing church buildings vandalised, and in some cases of being prevented from returning to their home and ministry.



WHAT WE DO IN INDIA

With your help we support three projects in India:

-  Providing Bibles in local Indian languages (Bibles are often destroyed when Hindu extremists attack churches).
-  One-day Pastors' Conferences draw together leaders who have faced opposition, for Bible teaching, fellowship and advice on their legal rights.
-  Giving vital legal aid support to assist pastors who are arrested.



RICHARD WURMBRAND'S PLEA 4

'Bibles are urgently needed'

Richard Wurmbbrand, who inspired the founding of Release in 1968, challenged believers in the West with eight pleas, including campaigning on behalf of persecuted Christians.

His fourth plea emphasises the continuing need to provide persecuted Christians with Bibles.

Many countries experience 'Bible poverty'. Richard was also concerned to produce engaging materials to help young people grow in the Lord. Release has a number of initiatives focused on getting the Bible in various formats into the hands of those with little access to the Scriptures.



RICHARD WURMBRAND'S PLEA 1

'Give us the tools we need'

Richard, who had experienced persecution in communist Romania, was passionately concerned about the growth of the church in persecuted environments.

His overriding message was for Christians in the 'free world' to give their persecuted family what they needed to continue to flourish in hostile and restricted countries.

Such tools may include proper clothing, food, vehicles, printing, communication, duplication, office equipment, discipleship and evangelistic materials in written, audio, or video formats, training, and other such items relating to ministry.



Population: **1,297 million**

Capital: **New Delhi**

Government:
Parliamentary republic

Religion: **Hindu 74%, Muslim 14%, Christian 6%, other 6% (Operation World).**



Christians in India are facing growing oppression and hostility, according to Release's partner.

With a nationalist BJP government in power since 2014, Hindu extremists continue to be bolder in attacking Christians. Hindu nationalist rhetoric has become increasingly strident, and it is claimed that local authorities will often turn a blind eye to attacks on Christians.

India has a constitution which affirms freedom both to practise and to propagate religion, yet Christian pastors are regularly accused of 'forcibly converting': inducing, coercing or bribing someone to become a Christian.

Although such accusations do not necessarily lead to convictions they are intended – along with threats and violent attacks – to hinder gospel ministry.

'STOP – OR WE WILL KILL YOU'

militants warned Indian Pastor Harinarayan.



Harinarayan

Harinarayan established a small fellowship that met in his home. To fund the ministry he and others set up a small tailoring business. Two years ago Hindu opponents in the village tried to destroy the ministry by stealing everything from the shop.

Then, last summer, some members of the RSS, a prominent Hindu nationalist organisation, came and told him to close the church, because he was converting Hindus. 'You are a Hindu; you are from a Hindu family,' they told him. 'You must stop – or we will kill you!'

They beat him up and took him to the local Hindu temple, where they tried to force him to accept the Hindu religion. When he refused they locked him inside a community centre and said some people were going to come and kill him.

'When I was inside I remembered the Bible verse, "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35),' he said.

Members of his congregation were also threatened and attacked.

Fortunately Release's partner was alerted and the police were called to the village. Harinarayan was taken away for his own safety – but since that day has not been able to go back to his village. He continues to pastor and encourage the believers by phone, although some have, sadly, fallen away as a result of the attack and the on-going intimidation.

'It has been a difficult time,' he confessed. *'But I believe my Lord is standing with me in every situation.'*

• **Pray for protection for Harinarayan**

WILL YOU GIVE £20 OR MORE TODAY TO HELP PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS THROUGH RELEASE?

By sending a gift to Release today you can help persecuted Christians to stand strong in their faith.

You can help provide Bibles, discipleship resources, free legal aid, food and shelter to those who are suffering.

To give generously today:

- Use the attached card
- Give online at releaseinternational.org
- Call: 01689 823491



Militants protest against the acquittal of Asia Bibi.



Asia Bibi

ACQUITTED

Asia Bibi has been acquitted of blasphemy, but the battle for religious freedom in Pakistan is far from over, says Release CEO Paul Robinson

The story of Asia Bibi highlights the plight of many Christians in Pakistan – not only those who have been accused of blasphemy.

For years now, Pakistan has been a nation of concern for Release. The culture of intolerance and persecution has been growing, and attacks against Christians are on the rise.

‘Asia Bibi was guilty merely because she had been accused’

Although Asia Bibi was declared innocent of blasphemy in October by the highest court in the land, at the time of writing she remains in detention for her own protection. Although the country’s top judges have thrown out the case against her, saying it’s full of inconsistencies and

lies, extremists continue to call for this innocent woman to be hanged.

Asia Bibi was guilty merely because she had been accused. She had been accused merely because she was a Christian.

Along with her execution, these extremists have called for the killing of the Supreme Court judges who acquitted her. They have called for mutiny in the army and the overthrow of the government.

Previously, they have assassinated politicians and judges of good faith who dared even to call for debate on the blasphemy laws. These extremists have declared that anyone supporting a blasphemer is also guilty of blasphemy, and thereby deserving of death.

Release has long called for these

abusive laws to be repealed, and will continue to do so.

Time and again, Release has seen attacks against Pakistan’s Christian minority on the pretext of blasphemy. A cry goes up, a mob gathers and innocent people are killed. A disproportionate number of those accused are from the Christian minority, whose lives, like Asia’s, have been destroyed by the mere accusation.

The Supreme Court judges who acquitted Asia stated in their ruling: ‘Since 1990, 62 people have been murdered as a result of blasphemy allegations, even before their trial could be conducted in accordance with law.’

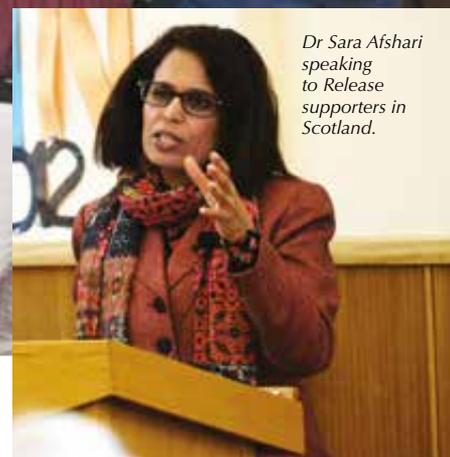
Today many of the 4.5 million Christians in Pakistan (source: Operation World) fear that an increasing number view every Christian as a blasphemer or blasphemer-in-waiting, whose continued existence can no longer be tolerated.

These Christians wonder: if someone with the profile of Asia is not safe, what will happen to us?

Release calls on Christians everywhere who enjoy freedom of faith to be mindful of our brothers and sisters in Pakistan where the oxygen of that freedom is in short supply. We must continue to hold them in our hearts and in our prayers.]

IRAN

RUN THE RACE TOGETHER!



Dr Sara Afshari speaking to Release supporters in Scotland.

Iranian believer Dr Sara Afshari reminds us how our faithful prayers can sustain persecuted Christians in their darkest moments.

☞ I recall the time when a few of us Christian converts in Kerman, Iran, stayed up all night to pray. Two of our friends were in prison, and the authorities were considering closing down the church. We felt so alone, isolated and forgotten. It was as if we were the only Christians in the world. On that lonely night we had only the stars for company.

Years later, when I was studying in the UK, I received a letter from a Christian lady who assured me that she had been praying for believers in Kerman every single day for many years.

I suddenly understood the significance of the stars: we had not been alone, despite our feelings of isolation. In that moment we were surrounded by praying Christians in the UK and across the world.

In Iran I was brought up in an agnostic and communist family. I was very outspoken and often got into trouble! In my early teens I become an atheist activist.

I became interested in Christ in my first year at university in Iran. I started to read the Bible to get to know Him better, and I joined a small group of Muslims who were planning to convert to Christianity. I was baptised a few months later. Our local Episcopal church was not operating, so we re-opened it.

“Church members were regularly arrested, including myself.”

As our church grew, the government started to apply pressure. Church members were regularly arrested, including myself. Some were attacked and stoned in the street. A few were expelled from the university. Yet with every pressure our faith became stronger.

Sadly, not everyone can stand persecution, so some left. Later on, the authorities closed the church. Those who remained fought to keep our fellowship and worship alive. So

we met in a home. The owners of the house were arrested. We met in parks. We were arrested. We met on the mountains. We were stopped.

Each time the group became smaller, because the journey was tough. We replaced our meetings with prayer chains. Eventually, we scattered in different cities and towns in Iran.

Out of the group, God raised six of us to serve Him. Not everyone can overcome the trauma of persecution and be healed completely. So please pray for believers going through emotional agony: sometimes they feel they didn't “win the race”.

Let us stand in solidarity with persecuted Christians in Iran and around the world. Let them know that they are not losers but winners, they are not victims but conquerors. We are running the race together — and our eternal hope is much bigger than we can imagine! ☞

Dr Sara Afshari is a member of Release's Council of Reference.

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2019

Key partners report on the pressures they are likely to face this year

Coptic Christians mourn following an attack by armed gunmen that left seven dead in November. Photo Reuters/Mohamed Abd El Ghany.



AFRICA

NIGERIA

Fulani militants are likely to continue their devastating attacks against Christian communities in northern and central Nigeria throughout 2019.

Our partner reported an escalation of attacks in 2018: with up to 6,000 people killed and 50,000 displaced in the first six months alone. *'The escalation in the killing is very clear,'* he said. *'There is a deliberate plan to destroy and take over the predominantly Christian communities in the region.'*

In addition the terrorist group Boko Haram has targeted everything and everyone it views as being outside 'true Islam'. This includes not only Christians, whom the group has labeled 'infidels', but also secular schools and moderate Muslims. Young girls are particularly vulnerable to abduction.

'The campaign by Islamic Fulani cattle

herdsmen and Boko Haram terrorists is a strategic scorch-earthed battle, a modern-day jihad against Christianity in the northern and Middle Belt regions of Nigeria,' said our partner.



ERITREA

An estimated 350 evangelical Christians remain detained without trial under the repressive regime of President Isaias Afewerki. All Evangelical and Pentecostal churches have been banned since 2002. More than 100 believers have suffered more than ten years in jail in appalling conditions. In 2019 many Eritreans will continue to flee to neighbouring countries as refugees.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
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EASTERN ASIA



CHINA

2018 witnessed a sharp increase in opposition to religion in China, including Christianity. Many churches can no longer have children or youth in any of their activities, reports our partner. In some areas unregistered (illegal) churches have voluntarily disbanded to meet in small groups of under 15 people in order to avoid attention from the authorities.

The government, under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, is actively aiming to control anything not in line with its beliefs and desires. This includes religion, social media, internet access and ideas from abroad. It is attempting to 'clean up' society so that Communist Party members, armed forces, police and even teachers do not hold or propagate religious beliefs.

'The government wants Christianity to be a very minor activity held by unimportant, older people,' said our partner. For these reasons persecution of unregistered churches will continue in 2019.



NORTH KOREA

North Korea remains the most repressive state on earth, with Christians being targeted for brutal treatment.

Our partner estimates that there are about 100,000 Christians in North Korea, with some 30,000 being held in concentration camps.

The so-called 'peace process' currently unfolding between North Korea, South Korea and the US has not resulted in either freedom or the expectation of freedom for Christians in the country. North Korea's meetings with other countries have focused largely on international diplomacy and economics.

As a result intense pressure on the underground church will continue in 2019.

'Be aware that the North Korean government is using its state churches to deceive Christians worldwide into funding its continued efforts to crush the North Korean underground church,' said our partner.

'We believe that the North Korean state churches will raise the claim that what their government and its state church oppose is not Christianity, but rather the captivity of Christianity to Western imperialism.'

'Pray for the global church, the UK church, and your own church to stand with underground North Korean Christians.'

SOUTH ASIA



AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan remains anti-Christian and it continues to be illegal for an Afghan to become a Christian in the country.

During 2019 members of the small Christian community are likely to face similar pressures as in 2018: economic problems with rampant inflation, corruption, drought, lack of jobs, as well as insecurity and violence, and a feeling of hopelessness that things will never improve.

'Believers don't fear persecution from government, but rather from the Taliban,' said our partner, who has a media ministry in the region.

'Pray for protection, spiritually, for our listeners, our staff, our technology - that the enemy will not be able to destroy the message of God's love and truth.'

'We are grateful that together we can be part of seeing God build His church among the Afghan people.'





Hindu militants take to the streets in Calcutta.

INDIA

Hindu nationalism has increased since Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) came to power in 2014. Hindu extremists in several states attacked churches and individual Christians in 2018 – and are likely to continue to do so throughout 2019 (see feature on page 6).

Persecution in 2018 included the following incidents:

- In November a Christian prayer meeting was attacked by a mob of more than 100 Hindu radicals in Santhoshnagar in Hubli city, in the southern state of Karnataka. Several Christians were injured.
- In October a mob of Hindu extremists attacked Pastor Hanumanth Rao while conducting a prayer meeting in a Christian home in Parupalli village, in the Mahabubnagar District of Telangana.

PAKISTAN

‘The battle for religious freedom in Pakistan is far from over,’ said Release’s CEO Paul Robinson when blasphemy-accused Asia Bibi was acquitted in October (see page 9).

The story of Asia highlights the plight of many Christians in Pakistan – not only those who have been accused of blasphemy. The culture of intolerance and persecution has been growing and attacks against Christians have risen.

Consequently believers face a ‘frightening climate,’ reports one Release partner.

‘Christians in Pakistan continue to risk imprisonment, loss of home and assets, torture, rape and even death as a result of their faith in Jesus.’

Another partner, CLAAS (Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement), stated: *‘Hate against them continues to grow and they are considered inferior to Muslims. They are poor*

and forced to do menial jobs. They are treated as third-class citizens.’

For these reasons persecution and discrimination against Christians will continue in 2019.

SRI LANKA

Extremist Buddhist monks are likely to continue to incite attacks against churches and pastors in 2019, especially in rural areas.

At the end of 2018, for example, a mob of about 100 people attacked the Assemblies of God church building in Beliatta, southern Sri Lanka, demanding an end to worship services, and threatened to kill the pastor and his family.

Three days later, about 500 people, including Buddhist monks, staged a protest against the church, demanding the pastor leave the village.

Release partners say that Hindu extremist groups from India, including the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), are now extending their reach into Sri Lanka, especially in eastern areas.

CENTRAL ASIA

Legal restrictions and attacks by extremists will continue to put pressure on Christians in Central Asia in 2019.

In 2018, for example, our partner reported the following incidents:

- Christians were fined for preaching the gospel in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan.
- Believers throughout Central Asia were threatened and ridiculed, with their children suffering discrimination at school.
- A young Christian in Kyrgyzstan was severely beaten up for his faith, after a group of radical Muslims demanded that he renounce Christianity and return to Islam.

‘Please continue to prayerfully support faithful ministers who live and work in Central Asia – despite persecution,’ said our partner.

MIDDLE EAST



EGYPT

In Egypt Christians remain vulnerable to attacks by militants, especially outside the capital Cairo. Despite protection offered by the constitution, many Christians will continue to face violent attacks and discrimination during 2019.

In November 2018, for example, gunmen opened fire on two buses that were carrying Coptic Christians towards the Monastery of Saint Samuel the Confessor in Minya Governorate. Seven Christians were killed and seven more injured.

In May 2017 a bus carrying Christians on their way to the same monastery was also attacked by militants, killing 28 people.

In Sultan village, Minya Governorate, three Muslims were arrested last August after trying to burn a church. This was the fourth attack against the church in two months.

IRAQ

'Christians in Iraq continue to face persecution from Islamic State and other terror groups,' reports one partner.

'While Islamic State has been defeated on the battlefield, it remains a nebulous force able to mount attacks on vulnerable minority groups. In tandem with this threat, Christians are now caught in the middle of a territorial dispute in the north between



Coptic Christians continue to be under threat in Egypt.

the Iraqi state and Kurdish Regional Government.

'While thousands of Christians have returned to their ancestral homes in the Nineveh Plain, much of which had been under Islamic State occupation, it remains to be seen whether returnees have the will or means to rebuild their devastated villages.'

As a result of continuing persecution and conflict the Christian population in Iraq dropped from 1.5 million in 2003 to less than 200,000 in 2018.

One Christian woman, an Iraqi refugee, told our partner: *'We are so grateful for your help. God bless you all. It makes us feel that there are good people in this world trying to support us.'*



Many displaced Iraqis have fled to refugee camps in northern Iraq.

IRAN

Christians in Iran experienced growing persecution during 2018 as the authorities targeted those involved in any kind of Christian ministry.

'There is a campaign to try to stop the spread of Christianity, to arrest those who are leading house churches and those involved in evangelism and teaching,' said our partner.

'Persecution is on the increase because the authorities are aware of the growth of house churches and are determined at all costs to stem this. In fact their overall goal is to exterminate the Farsi-speaking church.'

'Pray for the protection of house churches. In view of security pressures, these groups are having to find alternative ways of meeting.'

As a result of growing government pressure, persecution is likely to continue in 2019.

'WE ARE SO GRATEFUL FOR YOUR HELP. GOD BLESS YOU ALL. IT MAKES US FEEL THAT THERE ARE GOOD PEOPLE IN THIS WORLD TRYING TO SUPPORT US.'

GOOD NEWS



NOT ABANDONED

These two smiling individuals, Vera on the left, and her mother Marina, have been the 'face' of our 50th anniversary campaign, 'Do Not Abandon Them!'

Marina's husband, Dmitry Shestakov, also known as David, an evangelist and pastor, was imprisoned in Uzbekistan in 2007 for four years for 'illegal religious activity'.

Marina, youngest daughter Vera and her two older sisters all waited for David – they didn't abandon him, and neither did you. You prayed, you gave, you wrote cards.



After David's release the family moved to the US to plant a church among Russian speakers.

'We already have a small home group of 10-12 people,' they told us recently. 'We really appreciate everything you did for us. May the Lord bless you abundantly.'



GOING, GOING, GONE!

Release supporter Chris Jones was 'absolutely delighted' to have made the winning bid (£875) for the painting *Emersion* by Surrey artist Marcella Lopez.

Chris, from Wigan, who is pictured collecting the work of art from Marcella, said his family had been asking him for ideas for a gift for his 70th birthday.

'This painting was the ideal solution so I was absolutely delighted to have been the successful bidder,' he said.

Thank you to everyone who took part in the auction, and thanks again to Marcella for donating such an inspiring painting to raise funds for our persecuted family.



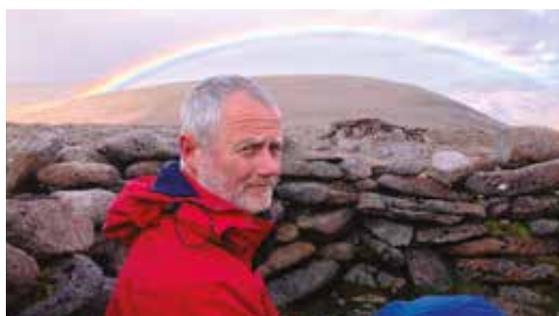
FINE DINING IS A WINNER

Volunteer Jean and her husband David from Kent wanted to raise funds for Release, but were unsure what they could do.

'I enjoy cooking, so I set out to prepare meals and invite people to either lunch or dinner,' she told us.

'I invited four people each time and provided a three-course meal with coffee and biscuits, asking for a donation of £8 per person. People were very generous and gave us £10. We really enjoyed it, and it gave me an opportunity to introduce old friends to new ones.'

Her nine meals were a lot of fun, and raised £238 for persecuted Christians. A great effort!



Well done to Laurie Chancellor who completed his sponsored walk from Aberdeen to Fort William, raising a fantastic £5,000 for persecuted Christians in Egypt (see page 18).

#IWillNotAbandon



TORTURED for CHRIST

'We watched the film and had a closing hymn. Nobody stirred. Silence. Then someone prayed. We sat in this amazing silence, not because we were stunned by what we saw – but because we were in the presence of God in a special way.'

Liz Grainger, Newtown Evangelical Church, Wales.

SHOW TORTURED FOR CHRIST IN YOUR CHURCH

Help inspire a new wave of support for persecuted Christians

Don't miss the chance to screen our film based on Richard Wurmbrand's best-selling testimony, *Tortured for Christ*.

The 70-minute film, professionally produced by our sister mission Voice of the Martyrs USA, is a powerful depiction of the man who inspired the ministry of Release in 1968.

Today, as we see the growing oppression of Christians around the world, persecuted believers need our help more than ever.

Showing *Tortured for Christ* in your church or house group is an ideal way to encourage prayer and support for our persecuted family – and to challenge the viewers' own walk with Christ.

ORDER YOUR FREE PACK TODAY

Our FREE pack will help you organise and promote your special *Tortured for Christ* film event in your church. It includes:

- *Tortured for Christ* DVD
- Tips for showing the film
- A5 invitation cards & A5 flyers
- A4 poster to promote your event
- Tickets
- Collection envelopes
- Thank You cards
- 'I will not abandon them' pledge cards

Simply tell us how many guests you would like to invite – and we'll send you everything you need.

Order today

- use the attached card
- email: info@releaseinternational.org
- call: 01689 823491



Catch a showing near you

A number of churches in the UK and Ireland are arranging public viewings of *Tortured for Christ* in the coming months: check out the listing at releaseinternational.org/events.

Them



FUNDRAISING PACK



Make a difference to the lives of persecuted Christians by using our new pack to organise your own fundraising event or activity. Contains:

- Creative fundraising ideas
- Four attractive A3 and A4 colour posters (pictured)
- Pledge cards
- Children's leaflets
- Collecting boxes and more!

Order your free pack today using the attached card or call 01689 823491 (email info@releaseinternational.org).

50TH ANNIVERSARY FEEDBACK!

If you joined us at one of our 50th Anniversary events last year (such as a screening of *Tortured for Christ*, speaker tour, exhibition or fundraising event) we'd love to hear your feedback. What did you like – or didn't like?

Email us at 50@releaseinternational.org.



HOW TO HOST YOUR OWN 'SABINA SUPPER'

Put on a supper or tea party in your home or church (or a picnic outdoors in the summer) and invite members of your church, your friends and family.

During the meal, take the opportunity to share Sabina Wurmbbrand's powerful story (she and her husband Richard inspired the founding of Release in 1968).

Release Women, a ministry of Release, has prepared a new pack to help you plan your event, which you can download FREE from releaseinternational.org (or call 01689 823491 if you want a printed copy).

All funds raised will support our Strength to Stand groups supporting vulnerable Christian women (see page 19).





OPPRESSED

BUT NOT DEFEATED

Release's Jack Norman, recently returned from Egypt, reports on how your support is helping Christian families who face oppression every day.

Mary and her family live in Upper Egypt. One day her children returned from school saying that fellow pupils were starting to make trouble for them, calling them 'infidels'.

Then the family were repeatedly told that life would be easier if they converted to Islam. As they stood firm in their Christian faith the situation became worse: should they stay and face the consequences, or flee from their increasingly hostile neighbours and find somewhere safe to live?

Like many others they chose to leave, but had difficulty selling their house. What Christian would buy it knowing what had happened? So Mary was forced to sell at a low price.

On another occasion Christians were meeting in a home in Upper Egypt to pray when local Muslims broke in, fearing that a church was starting. They caused a large amount of

damage to the house, and the local authorities were called.

The Christians were told simply to accept what had happened – and to stop meeting to pray. If they didn't, they could expect more attacks. The owners of the house received no compensation for the damage.

'You have seen, now you must do something'

These are just two examples of day-to-day oppression that I was told on my recent visit to Egypt. Release partners in Upper Egypt are encountering more and more families who have fled their homes in the face of such difficulties.

Release partner Ruth leads a team of people who, thanks to your support, are able to help families like these with loving care and practical support. I am reminded each time we

meet of how God brought her into this vital ministry.

When she first visited suffering Christians in Upper Egypt, God spoke to her: 'You have seen, now you must do something'. Ruth continues to 'do something', and she never does it half-heartedly! Filled with godly passion herself, she always tells her team: *'Do it with passion – or don't do it at all!'*

As Ruth and her team members help families to rebuild their lives, they are sometimes told: 'We were praying for someone to help, and then you showed up.'

Our partners are effectively the hands and feet of Jesus, and they are also the hands and feet of us in the UK and Ireland who pray and support Christians in Egypt. God is really using them to answer your prayers.

This ministry of compassion enables persecuted Christians to rejoice in their God, and to declare in the words of the Psalmist: 'They have greatly oppressed me from my youth, but they have not gained the victory over me' (Psalm 129:2).



BRINGING STRENGTH TO STAND

Your support is making a real difference to the lives of persecuted Christians.



Many Christians in the capital Cairo also face oppression and poverty on a daily basis. Your support for our Strength to Stand (STS) groups is a lifeline for vulnerable Christian women.

These groups teach poor Christian women basic life skills such as hygiene and parenting.

They are also instructed how to generate much-needed income for their families. Without this extra income, some families can go without daily essentials, even food.

All of the groups include Bible study and prayer. Hannah told me: *'When we come together we share our problems with the group. Our faith is built up as we see things we pray for being resolved.'*

Some of these women have fled to Cairo from Upper Egypt because of persecution, and they talk of being angry with God. As they become part of the group, many of them say they have found love and fellowship in their 'new family'.

The groups also address head-on the issue of young Christian women being tempted by Muslim men with the

promise of a better life. One Release partner working with the Strength to Stand groups told me he sees this work as part of his wider calling to 'immunise' Christians against the temptation to turn to Islam for the promise of an easier life.

Men too!

One of the projects is so successful that many husbands asked if they could have a similar group for them. In response one of the churches now has a thriving group running for around 60 men.

Many of these families are now attending church for the first time in years, and their neighbours are asking questions as they notice a real difference in the way they show respect to each other and to those around them.

Thanks to your prayers and giving, these Strength to Stand groups are having a real impact in strengthening the church in Egypt.

- Read more about the transforming impact of these Strength to Stand groups in the next edition of Release Women's *Embrace* newsletter.

To receive your copy: call 01689 823491.



DEADLY ATTACKS CONTINUE

Islamic State has claimed responsibility for a series of deadly attacks on Christians in Egypt over the past two years.

On Palm Sunday last year two churches in Tanta and Alexandria were bombed while they held their services, killing at least 44 people and injuring more than 100. This followed the bombing of a church in December 2016 which killed 29 people, almost all women and young girls.

In November, for the second time in just over a year, armed gunmen stopped a bus carrying Christians to St Samuel Monastery near Minya in Upper Egypt. Seven of the pilgrims were killed, including a 15-year-old boy and a 12-year-old girl. Six of those killed were from the same family.

A Release partner told us that one of the consequences of these attacks is 'fear leading to isolation' as Christians withdraw into their communities in order to feel safer.

While this is understandable, it means that they are no longer acting as salt and light in their neighbourhoods.

Names have been changed throughout.

A PRAYER FOR EGYPT

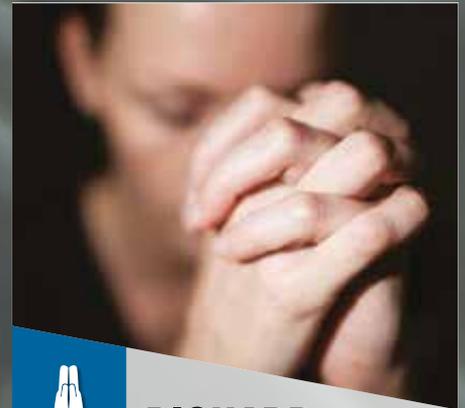
Almighty God, we pray for the work of Release's partners in Egypt, as they strengthen Your church in the face of ongoing oppression.

Lord, please provide our partners with the means and strength to help persecuted believers who are fleeing their homes. May each family receive Your comfort in the name of Jesus.

We thank You that where Christians are willing to take the costly step of engaging with their Muslim neighbours, they are seeing many come to faith in Christ.

We remember also those who persecute our Christian family, and ask that they may be saved.

In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.



RICHARD WURMBRAND'S PLEA 3

'Pray for persecutors, that they may be saved'

It is important that we pray for persecuted Christians – but also for their persecutors. Richard Wurmbbrand said that persecutors are 'as much our neighbours as anyone else'

BRING **HOPE** TO CHRISTIANS SUFFERING OPPRESSION BY SENDING A GIFT TO RELEASE TODAY.



Release partners work tirelessly, often in hostile environments, to bring strength to Christian families and communities.

Your gift of love can provide both practical support and pastoral care.

Will you make a gift today to provide help in the name of Jesus?

- use the attached card
- give online at releaseinternational.org
- call: 01689 823491

release
POTENTIAL

GOING UNDERGROUND

'It's hard for most of us in the UK and Ireland to know how it feels to be persecuted for our faith,' said Amy, a former Release Potential Change Maker.

'I don't know how it feels to have to watch my every move, to be careful who I talk to, or even to be imprisoned or tortured for my faith. But these are some of the things our brothers and

sisters across the world have to endure.'

Our Release Potential Underground church service in Belfast in November enabled youth and young adults to experience something of what that might feel like. *'It was a challenging night of worship, Bible study and opportunities to respond,'* said Release Potential team leader Chioma. *'It made persecution real and tangible.'*



Release board member Dr Berhane Asmelash (pictured) shared his powerful testimony of imprisonment in Eritrea at the recent Justice Conference, hosted by Tearfund in London in November.

'We loved being here with hundreds of believers who are passionate about

BE PASSIONATE FOR JUSTICE!

God's heart for justice,' said Release Potential team leader Chioma.

'We heard some hard-hitting stories and in response resolved to change certain things in our own lives. Many came from around the UK and Ireland and from Brazil, South Africa, Uganda and the US.'

release & your church



Invite a Release speaker to your church

To request a speaker for your church or fellowship group, please contact these numbers:

Ireland

Stephen on
028 9334 0014

London

Imtiaz on
07957 677162

Midlands & North

Kenneth on
07375 516408

Scotland

James on
07434 894016

South

Kenneth on
07375 516408

Wales & W Midlands

Paul on
07747 535588

Release Women

Laura on
01689 823491

Or call 01689 823491

FIND OUT MORE about organising your own experiential Underground church service, or about our unique Change Makers discipleship programme for youth and young adults: call 01689 823491 or email Chioma at potential@releaseinternational.org.

THE WORD

Development Manager James reflects on how the first two chapters of Exodus reveal the way God helps His people in the midst of oppression.

TURNING EVIL TO GOOD

In 2017 I had the privilege of visiting some of our partners and projects in Egypt. It was really quite humbling to see first-hand the cost that many people pay for choosing to follow Jesus.

We heard about children whose parents had chosen to leave Islam and turn to Jesus. These new believers wanted their children to know about Jesus too, so they taught them the Bible in their homes – just as we would with our children.

But when these little ones started school and they answered the teacher's questions with Bible answers instead of Koran answers, it drew a lot of negative attention, including beatings by teachers.

When we look at a world where this kind of thing is the common day-to-day experience for so many Christians it can be hard for us to understand.

The first two chapters of Exodus can help us to develop a solid biblical perspective on persecution.

When Jacob's family first moved to Egypt they were treated well. Their brother Joseph was the prime minister and they were given a special area of land to live on. But over time that legacy was forgotten and they were viewed simply as foreigners – or 'the others', the ones who were different. Pharaoh portrays the Hebrews as a dangerous minority, a threat to the stability of society.

That is exactly the position that many Christians find themselves in today – living as a minority group amongst a potentially hostile majority.

Pharaoh made the Hebrews suffer hard labour (Exodus 1:13). In Pakistan today many Christians find themselves working in the brick kilns – making bricks just like the ancient Hebrew people. This is low-paid and dangerous work.

In Exodus 1 Pharaoh goes on to slaughter the Hebrew baby boys (Exodus 1:15, 22). Today we know that extreme and systematic violence against Christians is growing in many parts of the world.

Why does God allow His people to suffer like this? One thing we can be sure of is that God does not desert His people in their suffering.

These first chapters of Exodus show us how God subverted Pharaoh's murderous plans to save the infant Moses from the Nile, even causing one of Pharaoh's own daughters to find him and to provide for his care

until he was old enough to be adopted into the royal family.

Inadvertently Pharaoh himself guaranteed the protection of this infant boy who eventually delivers the entire Hebrew people out of Egypt's hand. This is great irony, as God takes what Pharaoh planned for evil and turns it to good.

This is what God does. In all things He works for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28). He does permit suffering and evil. This is difficult to take and hard to understand – but for the believer suffering is never devoid of the redemptive touch of God.

Our Development Manager James is available to speak to churches in Scotland: see our list of speakers on page 21.

INSPIRING FAITH



'The sufferings that God sends us only strengthen us more and more in the faith in Him.'

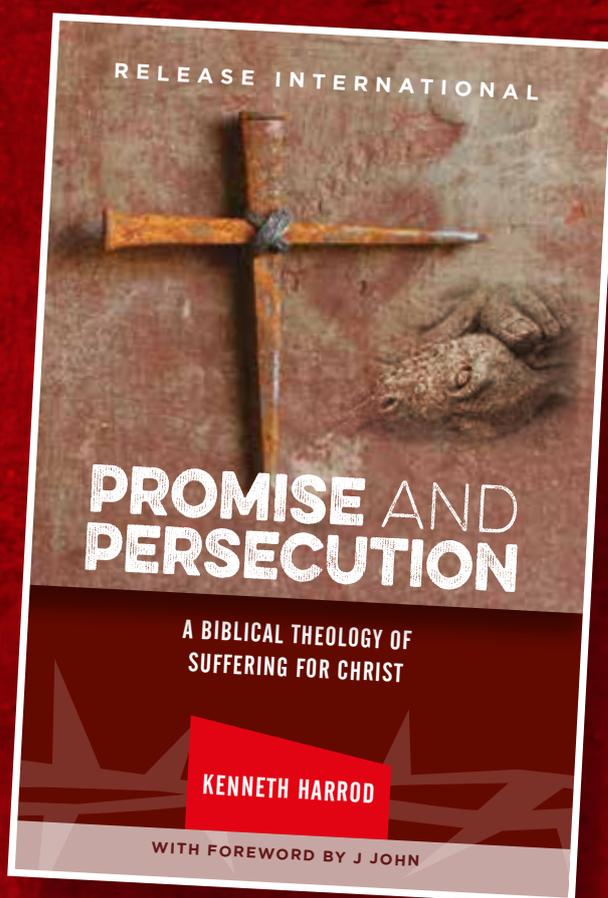
Pastor Richard Wurmbrand was imprisoned for 14 years in communist Romania in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1968 he inspired the founding of Release, which today continues his ministry to serve persecuted Christians around the world in the name of Jesus.

'A thoughtful and wise book on the biblical theology of persecution'

Revd Canon J. John, Director, Philo Trust

In his new book, Release's Kenneth Harrod helps us understand the persecution of Christians in the context of God's bigger plan of salvation.

Use the attached card to order now for just £8 (including p&p) or call: 01689 823491



GET READY FOR A CHALLENGE!

Join us on one of these four UltraChallenge walks – and raise funds for persecuted Christians at the same time.

July 13-14 **PEAK DISTRICT** (Dales-Bakewell)

Aug 31-Sept 1 **SOUTH COAST** (Eastbourne-Arundel)

Sept 7-8 **THAMES PATH** (Putney Bridge-Henley)

Sept 28-29 **NORTH DOWNS** (tbc)

Organised by Action Challenge, this is a great opportunity for supporters of Release to take part, opting to support Release as their chosen charity, and to enjoy some of the finest scenery in the UK.

Come as an individual or group, choosing to complete the whole route or a shorter section. You'll get full support and hospitality all the way.

Find out more at ultrachallenge.com.





Will you leave a legacy of enduring faith and love?

A legacy gift to Release International can be a natural continuation of your commitment to share God's love and compassion with persecuted Christians around the world.

For 50 years, your generous gifts have enabled Christians to stand strong in their faith in the face of persecution. With your support, Release's partners are providing prayerful, pastoral and practical help to persecuted Christians in over 25 countries.

By including a gift to Release International in your will you can enable that support to continue.



To request a free legacy brochure please call us on 01689 823491, email info@releaseinternational.org or use the attached card.

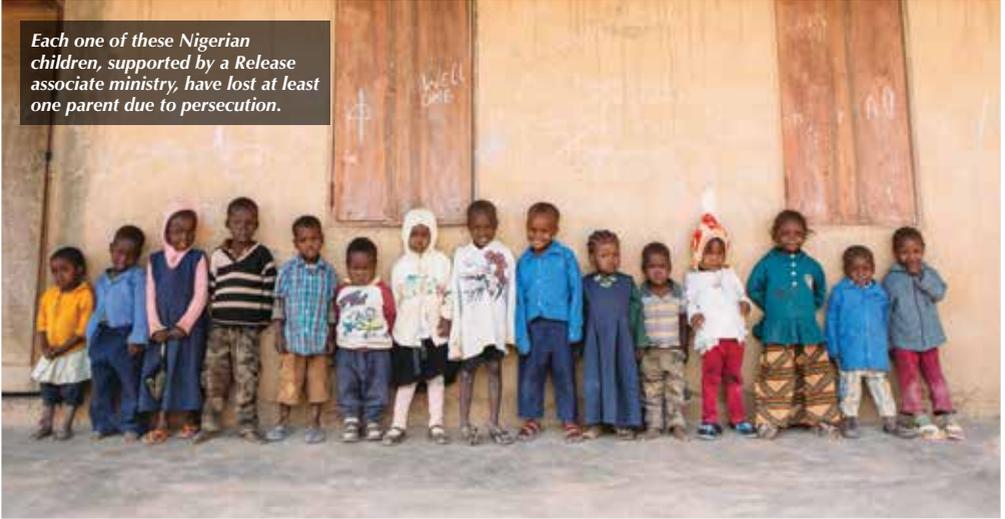
#IWillNotAbandonThem

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians

PRAYERSHIELD

JANUARY – MARCH 2019

Each one of these Nigerian children, supported by a Release associate ministry, have lost at least one parent due to persecution.



JANUARY 2019

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for your promise that in your strength I can advance against an army and scale a wall (Psalm 18:29). I have nothing to fear if I walk in step with you.

Lord, renew a steadfast spirit within me (Psalm 51:10). I pray that my Christian brothers and sisters worldwide will stand firm in their faith and keep their eyes fixed on you.

May they know that they are 'rooted and established in love' – your unshakeable, unstoppable love – and that therein lies their power to withstand the attacks of the enemy.

Give them stamina to endure, strength to overcome and hope to see beyond their present suffering.

In your precious name,
Amen

NIGERIA

TUESDAY 1: At the start of a new year, let's ask God to renew in us His compassion for the persecuted church and give us His insight into how to pray for our Christian family.

WEDNESDAY 2: Pray that God will provide for the many children, including those pictured, who have lost one or more parents in attacks by *Boko Haram* extremists or by Fulani militants.

THURSDAY 3: Please continue to pray for the release of the many Christian girls and women being held captive by *Boko Haram*. They include 15-year-old Leah Sharibu who is being held as

a 'slave' because she refused to recant her faith.

FRIDAY 4: Our contacts in Nigeria say that many Fulani in north-east Nigeria have come to faith in Christ. Pray that many more Fulani – and *Boko Haram* members – will follow their lead.

SATURDAY 5: Pray that the Nigerian Government will take decisive action to protect Christian communities from further violence. *Boko Haram* remains in control of parts of Borno and Yobe states, despite the Government's insistence it has defeated the group.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians



Eritrean Christian refugees worship God despite their difficult circumstances.

ERITREA

SUNDAY 6: About 165,000 Eritreans have registered as refugees in Ethiopia alone; many more are unregistered. Pray for the many Eritrean Christians who have fled their country due to persecution.

MONDAY 7: Pray for Mulu, an Eritrean Christian living in a refugee camp in northern Ethiopia. Her husband, Kiros, was killed in jail and Mulu was detained several times, always resisting attempts to make her deny Christ. She is living with HIV after being raped in jail.

TUESDAY 8: Twen, now in her 30s, has been in jail for more than 13 years and has suffered brutal treatment. When asked how people should pray for her, her only

prayer request was that God would be glorified in Eritrea. Praise God for Twen's faith, and ask Him to answer her prayer.

WEDNESDAY 9: Ask God to heal Pastor Oqbamichel Haimanot, released from jail last year after more than ten years in custody. Brutal treatment and inhumane conditions caused his mental and physical health to suffer.

MALAYSIA

THURSDAY 10: Pray for Christians in Malaysia, who are living under *Sharia* (Islamic law). Those who are arrested for contravening *Sharia* are often sent to rehabilitation centres.

FRIDAY 11: The Islamic authorities reportedly offer financial incentives to those converting to Islam. Pray that Christians will resist this pressure.

SATURDAY 12: Thank God that, for the first time in more than 60 years, the Malaysian Government includes Christian MPs. Ask God to give them favour and influence.

SUNDAY 13: Thank God that calls for greater religious freedom are growing in Malaysia. Yet, our partners there say this may provoke Muslim hardliners to greater persecution as they pursue their bid to make their country an Islamic state.

NORTH KOREA

MONDAY 14: Our partners say that the apparent easing of tensions between North and South Korea has not led to any change in religious liberty inside the 'hermit kingdom'. Ask God to sustain His long-suffering people inside North Korea.

TUESDAY 15: Continue to pray that the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un, will come to know Christ.

WEDNESDAY 16: Foreign missionary activity has been described in North Korea's official documents as 'acts of terror'. Pray that God will protect those spreading the gospel inside North Korea.

THURSDAY 17: Our partners fear that North Korea's 'state church' is an instrument of state propaganda, while the underground church continues to face intense persecution. Pray that the international community will not abandon North Korea's persecuted believers.

FRIDAY 18: Pray that North Korean officials will stop seeing Christians as 'bad citizens' but rather as a positive social force.

SATURDAY 19: Praise God that our partners were able to send nearly 40,000 Bibles into North Korea in the past year.

AFGHANISTAN

SUNDAY 20: Afghan Christians continue to face persecution in the form of threats, discrimination and occasionally abductions. In some areas, they face opposition from local Taliban. Ask God to strengthen His church in Afghanistan.

MONDAY 21: Praise God that when the Taliban asked one state governor to take action against Christians but provided no proof of their alleged misdeeds, the governor threatened to prosecute the Taliban if they presented groundless accusations again.

TUESDAY 22: Pray for a family who had to leave their town because their daughter was suffering persecution at school. They moved to the capital but were unable

to enrol her in school there because her old school would not release her reports.

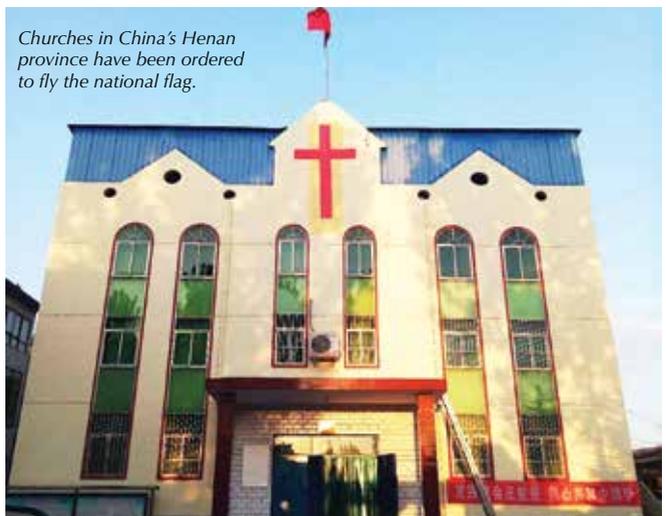
WEDNESDAY 23: Pray for our partners bringing the good news of Jesus through media such as radio, TV, the internet and mobile phone apps.

THURSDAY 24: Ask God to bless our partners in Afghanistan – and worldwide – by raising up more workers to join their ministry and providing for them financially.

CHINA

FRIDAY 25: Last year saw a sharp increase in opposition to religion, including Christianity, in some parts of China. Many church buildings have been forcibly closed. Pray that God's living Word will touch lives despite these restrictions.

SATURDAY 26: The ban on under-18s in church has been



Churches in China's Henan province have been ordered to fly the national flag.

actively enforced and many churches no longer have any children or youth in any of their activities. Pray that God will speak to China's children in other ways.

SUNDAY 27: In some areas, government officials have enlisted schools to promote the idea that religion is 'bad for children' and against Communist Party thought. Pray this will provoke families to explore why faith is so dangerous.

MONDAY 28: In some areas house churches have voluntarily disbanded to meet in smaller groups to avoid officials' attention. Pray that these groups will be able to function under the radar of state control.

TUESDAY 29: Pray for those under pressure to deny they are Christians – including children who are being told not to identify themselves as 'Christian' on official forms.

WEDNESDAY 30: Pray that Release partners will be able to continue their work. Join with one partner in thanking God that last year 'no long-term workers were evicted from China and all of them were able to continue the work God has called them to'.

THURSDAY 31: Please pray that the church in China will grow in number and in maturity and closeness to God. Praise God that He is in control.

FEBRUARY 2019 PAKISTAN

FRIDAY 1: Christians are suffering mounting discrimination, including from government policies and discriminatory laws which cast them as second-class citizens. Pray that the Government will start to stand up to extremist and radical groups and uphold equal rights for all citizens.

SATURDAY 2: Continue to pray for reform of Pakistan's blasphemy laws which are a major cause of Christian persecution.

SUNDAY 3: Pray that the Government and police will begin to take seriously the issue of the kidnap and forced conversion of women, particularly those belonging to Christian and Hindu communities.

MONDAY 4: Our partners say that when girls are abducted and forcibly converted, some parents do not report their daughters' disappearance because they fear retaliation from influential Muslims in their community. Pray for justice for these families.

TUESDAY 5: Teenage sisters Rimsha and Riffat have both been abducted, forcibly converted and forced into marriage. Ask God to strengthen them and their parents – and reunite this family.

WEDNESDAY 6: Thank God for the acquittal and release of Punjab farm labourer Asia Bibi after nine years in jail on 'blasphemy' charges. Ask God to protect her and her family and enable them to rebuild their lives.

THURSDAY 7: Pray specifically for a change of heart among the leaders of the Islamist political party *Tehreek-e-Labbaik*, who have called for the death of Asia Bibi and the judges who acquitted her.

FRIDAY 8: Please remember the many Christians detained in Pakistan under charges of 'blasphemy', including seven taken into custody between January and June last year.

SATURDAY 9: Among the Christians detained for blasphemy in the first half of 2018 (above) were Sajid Masih and his cousin Patras Masih. Pray for their healing and release: Sajid was badly injured when he leapt from the window of a police building in Lahore where the cousins were being tortured.

SUNDAY 10: Ask God to speak into the anger and hatred of all extremists in Pakistan – and replace their intolerance with a desire to understand those of other faiths, including Christians.

MONDAY 11: Please pray for justice for the more than 40 Christians still detained in Youhanabad in connection with the riots that followed church bombings in 2015.

PRAYERSHIELD

Two suspected bombers were killed during the riots.

TUESDAY 12: Please pray for spiritual refreshing and wisdom for our partners in Pakistan – and across the world.

WEDNESDAY 13: Pray for our partner's work in helping Christian youths in Pakistan gain access to higher education in the hope that this will equip them to stand up for their community's rights.

THURSDAY 14: Thank God that women involved in the Strength to Stand (S2S) groups that Release has helped establish are becoming more confident and growing in their faith.

IRAN

FRIDAY 15: Ask God to protect those involved in Christian ministry, who have become a target for Iranian officials. This includes those who are leading house churches and those involved in evangelism and teaching.

SATURDAY 16: Praise God that the church in Iran is growing. Pray that state attempts to eradicate the Farsi-speaking church will only lead to further growth.

SUNDAY 17: Pray for those Christians who have left Iran due to persecution, that they will take the gospel with them. Pray too for those who choose to remain.

MONDAY 18: Pray for those in prison in Iran, some facing lengthy prison sentences, because of their faith. Pray they will know the presence of the Lord and remain a strong witness for Christ.

TUESDAY 19: Pray for Christians who travel abroad for teaching and fellowship, as they are likely to be called in for questioning on their return. Pray that God will raise up more Bible teachers inside Iran.

WEDNESDAY 20: Christian satellite programmes and social media are a lifeline for many believers in Iran. Pray that those who have a spiritual hunger will have access to these media.

THURSDAY 21: Pray for the protection of the evangelists who are seeking to reach out to new areas in Iran.

CENTRAL ASIA

FRIDAY 22: Ask God to provide for Christians in the Central Asia region who have been fined for spreading the gospel. Thank Jehovah Jireh that He provided when a church in Kyrgyzstan was attacked by arsonists so that it could be quickly rebuilt.

SATURDAY 23: Pray for a young Kyrgyz man called Eldos who was beaten by Muslim fanatics in a bid to make him deny Christ. They threatened to kill him if he

went to the police – which he did.

SUNDAY 24: Pray for an evangelical pastor in Tajikistan who was arrested recently. Pray that God will fill him with His extraordinary peace throughout his ordeal.

MONDAY 25: Pray for ten Christians arrested and later fined by the security police in Tajikistan in August. They had gone to the Pamirs mountain area to share the gospel.

TUESDAY 26: Please pray for Christians in Tajikistan as they seek to share God's love in a hostile environment. Our partners say that opposition has grown in areas where locals have come to faith.

WEDNESDAY 27: Christians in Central Asia often suffer threats and ridicule. Pray especially for their children, who face discrimination from classmates and teachers alike at school. Ask God to restore the hope of Christians in Central Asia.

THURSDAY 28: Our partners in the region support churches and their leaders with fellowship, encouragement and prayer. Pray that Christians receiving this support will feel strengthened and encouraged, just as Moses did when Aaron and Hur held up his arms in battle (Exodus 17:12).

MARCH 2019

INDIA

FRIDAY 1: Pray for Christians in India as they seek to share the gospel in difficult and hostile situations. Our partner in India says that Hindu nationalists are becoming increasingly bold in opposing Christians.

SATURDAY 2: Pray for Pastor Harinarayan, from north India. Hindu extremists beat him, dragged him to a temple and tried to force him to accept their religion. He cannot return to the village where he was a pastor, but has been ministering to people by phone.

SUNDAY 3: Pastor Suryadev was left unconscious with a

fractured skull after Hindu youths threw him from a moving train. Give thanks that God preserved his life.

MONDAY 4: Pray for Pastor David and his congregation. Their church was vandalised by Hindu extremists and some of his congregation were badly beaten. Give thanks to God for David's willingness to suffer for Christ.

TUESDAY 5: Pastors Jeet and Regi request prayer for Christians in Bihar, which has long been a tough area for Christian mission. Pray that believers will stand for their faith and be good witnesses for Christ, even in the face of intimidation.

WEDNESDAY 6: Pray for Pastor Sevyra who was left unconscious after being

beaten by Hindu activists. He was unwilling to donate money to support local idol worship. Pray that the Lord will bless his gospel ministry in a remote area.

THURSDAY 7: Pray that extremists emboldened by the hostile tone of the Government, led by the Hindu nationalist BJP, will turn away from their violence and seek reconciliation and forgiveness.

FRIDAY 8: Pastor Steeven was beaten, given electric shocks and almost strangled when he tried to get his planning permission for a church building recognised by local officials. His attackers forced him to sign over the land he had acquired. Pray for Release's partner as they pursue the recovery of the land.

SATURDAY 9: Pastor Krishna and his wife were arrested by police after he was accused of converting Hindus, while four members of his church were beaten with bricks. Pray the congregation will find a new place to meet.

SUNDAY 10: Gorak (pictured) became a Christian after his son was healed from tuberculosis. He now ministers in a high-caste Hindu area and has been threatened and accused of forcibly converting people. Many of his congregation are afraid. Pray for courage to persevere.



Indian pastor Gorak has faced threats and accusations of forcible conversion.

PRAYERSHIELD

MONDAY 11: Pray for the work Release supports in India. Pray that the one-day Pastors' Conferences will continue to be times of blessing and encouragement for those who have faced hostility for their ministry.

IRAQ

TUESDAY 12: The Christian minority in Iraq are suffering less persecution than during the Islamic State insurgency but the political instability means that they are not protected as a community. Pray that the Government will take firm action to uphold religious liberty for all.

WEDNESDAY 13: Pray for Christians in Iraq as they try to rebuild their lives and their homes. Pray that God will provide work for them.

THURSDAY 14: Many Christian families are still living as refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan and depending on relief aid as they wait for the security situation to improve. Pray that their hope will be restored through the love and practical support of our partners there.

FRIDAY 15: Pray for thousands of Christians who have returned to their ancestral homes in the Nineveh Plain, northern Iraq, now the Islamic State occupation of their lands is over. But others have moved in to this region too, including Sunni families and Shia militias loyal to Iran.

SATURDAY 16: The Christian population in Iraq has dropped from 1.5 million in 2003 to less than 200,000 today. Pray that God will multiply this remnant so that His church regains its full strength – then grows even further.

SUNDAY 17: Many Iraqi Christian refugees fled to Jordan and many are looking to seek asylum in Australia, where our partner FRRME is providing emergency relief in partnership with local churches.

MONDAY 18: Please pray for God's continued protection and favour on the ministry of St George's Church, Baghdad. Praise God that Rev Faiz Jerjees was honoured by the Iraqi Government for his reconciliation work and his role supporting the human rights of all Iraqis.

TUESDAY 19: The Medical Clinic at St George's Church provides medical care to around 80 patients a day, and a new primary school will bring Muslim and Christian children together. Pray that God will meet those in their care.

EGYPT

WEDNESDAY 20: Often, when our partners arrive to help families in Upper Egypt, the locals' first response is to say that they were praying for help and then, 'You showed up.' Thank God that prayers are powerful!

THURSDAY 21: When Release partners provide practical help for people in desperate poverty in Upper Egypt, those they help are hugely encouraged to know they are part of a global Christian family who care for them. Praise God for the way this builds their faith.

FRIDAY 22: Pray for the many families who have had to leave their homes in Upper Egypt because of threats against them and their children and demands that they convert to Islam.

SATURDAY 23: The family of 'Mary' is just one of an increasing number in Upper Egypt who were forced to flee their homes because of opposition to Christians locally. Pray that her family – and others like them – will settle into their new village quickly and trust God for their future.

SUNDAY 24: Often the discrimination against families such as Mary's (above) is targeted at their children, who can suffer abuse and rejection at school. Pray that Christian children in this situation will become resolute in their faith.

MONDAY 25: One aspect of our partners' work is supporting children who have been displaced and who are often traumatised and afraid. Pray that God will be their 'refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble' (Psalm 46:1).



A Release associate ministry provides assistance for oppressed believers in Egypt.

TUESDAY 26: Our partners are working with women in Upper Egypt to help set up micro-enterprise projects – particularly widows and those who have fled their villages. Ask God to prosper them as they begin to generate an income for their family.

WEDNESDAY 27: Recently, two members of the Muslim Brotherhood tried to kidnap the 11-year-old son of one of our partner’s team in Egypt.

Thank God that a passer-by intervened to stop this. Pray that God will give this mother His peace and that her children will be kept safe.

THURSDAY 28: Ask God to strengthen Christians from a Muslim background in Egypt. Pray for a woman whose brother and uncle beat her severely to try to force her to return to Islam. So far, she has stood firm.

FRIDAY 29: Please pray that God will touch the hearts of all those who are persecuting family members because they have turned to Christ. Ask Him to prompt them to explore Christianity for themselves.

SATURDAY 30: Pray for those in Egypt who try to find safe places for those who have to flee their families after coming to Christ.

SUNDAY 31: Praise God that through the testimonies of those who withstand persecution, and through dreams and visions of Jesus himself, many Muslims are coming to faith in Egypt today.

Lord Jesus,

Thank you for coming to this world so that I may have life in all its fullness. Thank you that you have defeated the thief who comes only to steal and kill and destroy (John 10:10).

Lord, please show my persecuted brothers and sisters that their hope is in you. Remind them of your promise to prepare a table for them in the presence of their enemies, to anoint them and cause their cup to overflow (Psalm 23:5-6).

Help them to live by faith, not by sight, and fill them afresh with your Spirit today.

Amen

Sources: China Aid; Middle East Concern; Morning Star News; Release partners and contacts; VOM USA.

Names in inverted commas have been changed to protect identities. While we do not provide financial support to every Christian mentioned in *Prayer Shield*, we believe in the power of prayer to change lives.

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