

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

JUL-SEPT 2023

# voice

of Persecuted Christians

**HELPING  
CHRISTIANS  
IN FLIGHT**

*News, stories and prayer requests  
from persecuted Christians around the world*



# Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

**Remember  
Christians  
in flight**

**It's that time of the year when many of us think about going on holiday, either here or abroad. We get excited as we look forward to visiting a new place for a week or two. When we return, hopefully refreshed, we may look back on a great time away but add 'there's no place like home'.**

In this edition of *Voice* focusing on those who have been forced to flee, you will read of those who have left their own countries but have not had the option of returning to their homes. Their departure was forced and is permanent – unless there are dramatic changes in their homelands.

Aster had to leave Eritrea (see page 10) after an horrendous time in prison; as did Priscilla and Matthew from Iran. Today believers like them can struggle to adjust to a new life, missing family and friends and having to adjust to a different culture and language in a society that does not necessarily welcome refugees, especially Christian ones.

However, their true home, as for all followers of Christ, is not on this earth. They know that; that is why they have borne the consequences of sharing their faith, which has included exile.

Their testimonies point to another place – an eternal home. So let's be inspired as we read their stories and, like them, live with a constant awareness of our ultimate destination.

On pages 12-13 you'll find our special Flight Map, showing how and where today Christians are being forced to flee their homes – whether as internally displaced survivors of persecution in places such as Nigeria or as refugees.

Please do share this pull-out map with others – it is ideal for church noticeboards – so that more people can pray for their persecuted family.

## **PLAYING OUR PART**

As you'll read on page 21, many Christians we talk to in the UK still do not realise the extent of persecution around the world. That's why it's vital we share the message with our churches and many Christian friends.

One way Release International will be doing this in the summer is by attending Christian exhibitions and conferences. If you're at one of these events please do come say hello at our stand. We'd love to see you.

As well as attending these gatherings, we also provide speakers who are available to share the message in local churches. Contact details are on page 21.

Another great way of getting the message out is to be a Church Representative for Release International in your fellowship, providing updates on the persecuted and encouraging prayer and support. If you do not have a Church Representative in your congregation, then why not consider taking on this rewarding volunteering role yourself. Find out more on page 20.

## **PROVIDING A LIFELINE**

Because of your generous support, our partners are able to provide practical and pastoral care for those who sometimes have no option but to flee as a result of persecution. You can read how your gifts are making a difference to their lives on pages 15-17.



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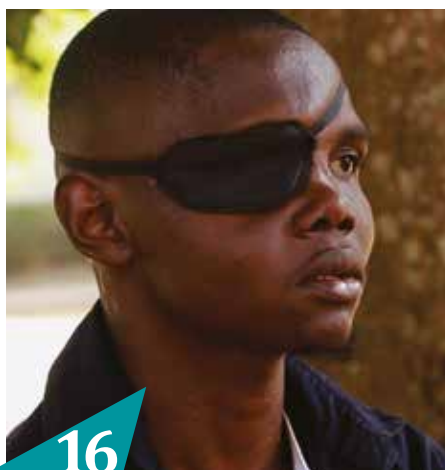
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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

**voice**  
of Persecuted Christians

Release helps Christians in the UK and Ireland to actively engage with their persecuted brothers and sisters around the world: praying with them, standing with them, helping them, and learning lessons of true Christian discipleship with them.

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# Faith under fire

## Attacks on Nigerian villages claim 168 lives

Around 30 Christian villages were attacked by Fulani militants in Mangu, central Nigeria, in May. At least 125 villagers, including children, were killed in the raids. Among the injured was an eight-month-old baby, Precious Mani, who was shot twice but survived. Her parents and five siblings were among the dead in the attack on Nbn Ward.

Similar attacks over the same period claimed another 43 lives.

Partners of UK-based Release International have been providing emergency relief aid as well as medical supplies to a hospital treating the victims.

One survivor from the village of Jwakom told our partners: 'We saw people running and started to hear consistent gunshots. Our men told us to go. We all fled. We barely survived.'

A mother whose oldest child was killed in the attack said: 'We started hearing gunshots in the night at around midnight. My grandmother and the girl who stays with me were killed, along with my first born. My five-year-old has been seriously wounded, too. He's in great pain.'

She identified the attackers as militant Fulani herders. 'They are our neighbours,' she said. 'Our house is just besides theirs. They called my son by name.'

According to Nigerian NGO Intersociety, 1,080 Christians were killed in attacks in the first quarter of 2023 alone.

## Death sentence for blasphemy accused in Pakistan



Noman Masih

A 22-year-old Christian convicted of blasphemy has been handed a death sentence by a court in Bahawalpur, Pakistan.

Lazar Allah Rakha, attorney for Noman Masih (pictured), said that the sessions court announced its verdict at the New Central Jail Bahawalpur, in Punjab Province, though the prosecution failed to provide evidence of the blasphemy charge against him, according to sources.

*'I'm extremely disappointed by the conviction, because there was absolutely no case,' Rakha told Morning Star News. 'There was no proof against Noman, and none of the witnesses produced by police could corroborate the blasphemy allegation against him.'*

Masih's trial concluded in January, but the court repeatedly postponed the verdict on various pretexts, Rakha said. Masih was convicted of blaspheming Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, which carries a mandatory death sentence under Section 295-C of Pakistan's blasphemy statutes.

*'Despite so many contradictions in the case, I'm at a loss to understand why [the judge] sentenced Noman instead of acquitting him,' Rakha said. 'This is murder of justice.'*

Thankfully no one has been executed for blasphemy in Pakistan but those accused often end up languishing in prison for years waiting for their appeals to be heard.



Musarrat Bibi

Also in May a court in Pakistan released on bail a Christian woman charged under a blasphemy statute that calls for life in prison, Rakha said.

Rakha told Morning Star News that the post-arrest bails of Musarrat Bibi (pictured) and a Muslim accused along with her, Muhammad Sarmad, were admitted on bonds of 100,000 rupees (£270) each.

Bibi, a 45-year-old widow, and Sarmad are illiterate and were only carrying out orders of the school administration to clean the storeroom where she worked as an office worker and Sarmad as a gardener, the lawyer said. Intent must be proven for a blasphemy conviction in Pakistan.

Bibi and Sarmad had been told to clean the storeroom at the Government Girls Higher Secondary School in a village in Arifwala, Pakpattan District, which was filled with paper and other scrap items, in April.

The two workers allegedly gathered the wastepaper and other scrap in a corner of the school and set them on fire. Some students later noticed that the burned items contained pages with koranic verses.

*'Both accused had no intention of burning the koranic pages,' Rakha said.*



**Second raid on Chinese church** Joint law enforcement officials raided Zhongxing Church in Zhengzhou, Henan province, in May, entering the building and destroying personal property, according to Release partner ChinaAid.

A ban notice was sent to the church, and a seal was placed on the front door. Church members left personal belongings at the scene, which were stolen. This is the second time since 2019 that it has been raided by the authorities.

*Because the house church is not officially recognised as a social organisation, the police were allowed to destroy property and steal personal belongings, said ChinaAid. Chinese Communist Party-sanctioned churches do not face this level of persecution.*



## Listen to our latest podcasts



**OUT OF THESE ASHES** *'I am asking God that out of these ashes will rise a wave of an uncommon, unseen revival.'* So said Nigerian Archbishop Ben Kwashi, commenting on two decades of violence against Christian communities in his country. In this edition of Release International's Voice Podcast we speak to journalist Andrew Boyd, who serves as Press Officer for Release International. Andrew has visited Nigeria on several occasions to report on the suffering of Christians. He shares his analysis of the atrocities in Nigeria and discusses why it is important to hear the stories of persecution – and how he has been inspired by some of the Christians he has met.

**A DOOR FOR THE WORD** While in prison the Apostle Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians, 'Pray for us that God may open a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ'. In this edition of the Voice podcast we continue our current focus on Nigeria. We speak to Mark Mukan, who oversees one of the projects Release International is supporting in that country – a project that seeks to take the gospel back to those areas ravaged by violent persecution.

**NIGERIA: COMFORT FOR THE SUFFERING** For the past two decades Christians in northern and central Nigeria have endured horrendous violent persecution. Thousands have been killed and many more forced to flee, in the face of Islamist extremist attacks. In April Release International launched a three-month campaign called Out of these ashes to focus attention on the situation in Nigeria and to call Christians to committed prayer. In this edition of the Voice podcast we speak to Mark Lipdo, a Release International partner in Nigeria, about one particular response to the suffering of Christians in that country. Hear about the Trauma Healing Workshops his organisation runs and some powerful testimonies of the positive impact those workshops have had on Christians who have suffered persecution.

**Sign up to Release**



## 'Worst anti-Christian violence in India'

More than 300 churches and at least 70 church administrative and school buildings were recently destroyed and 75 Christians killed in Manipur state in northeast India, according to an assessment by the Federation of Indian American Christian Organisations (Fiacona).

Other groups estimate that as many as 45,000 people have been displaced in what Fiacona calls *'the worst anti-Christian violence India has ever seen'*.

Lists of burned churches sent to Premier Christian News from church bodies in Manipur reveal that the violence, which started in May, directly affected Christians within both communities: the Christian tribal groups and the mainly Hindu Meitei people group.

*'Though Meiteis are primarily considered Hindu or of Sanamahi faith, a small percentage of them have lately converted to the Christian faith,'* Fiacona's statement read. *'In Fiacona's last counting, 145 churches that belong to Meitei Christians and 172 tribal churches have been burnt or destroyed.'*

The Evangelical Fellowship of India and other parties subsequently filed a petition at the country's Supreme Court, calling for an agency to be set up to monitor attacks against Christians. In response, the Government denied that any persecution was taking place against Christians, dismissing any trouble they faced as a result of personal disputes.

Events in Manipur follow worsening conditions for Christians across India. In the first two months of this year there were reportedly 123 assaults against believers.

(Sources include Premier Christian News)

## Iranian couple acquitted

A 64-year-old Christian convert with advanced Parkinson's disease and his wife have been acquitted and released from their combined 10-year prison sentence.

Homayoun Zhavah, whose health has deteriorated while in prison, and his wife Sara Ahmadi had been detained in Tehran's Evin Prison since August last year, serving sentences of two and eight years respectively for their involvement in a house church.

They were first arrested in 2019, sentenced in 2020 and summoned to prison in 2021, only to be informed they could return home. However, last August they were summoned again, and this time detained.

Their first two applications for a retrial were rejected, but at Easter they were informed that the Supreme Court had finally ordered their case to be heard again by an appeal court.

In May a court in Tehran acquitted the couple and ordered for them to be released.

In the ruling, the judge said that gathering with people of one's own faith was *'natural'*, and having books related to Christianity was *'also an extension of their beliefs'*.

He added that there was *'no evidence'* that Sara and Homayoun had acted against the country's security or had connections with opposition groups or organisations.

(Source: Article 18)

# Behind bars for the One who set them free

*Rejected by their families and even imprisoned by the authorities, Iranian converts to Christianity who share the gospel often end up having to flee their homeland. Tom Hardie meets two believers who have suffered for the faith yet whose lives have impacted many people*

As the door to the apartment opened, we were greeted by two smartly dressed women – one our translator for the day, the other an Iranian Christian who uses the pseudonym ‘Priscilla’\*. Both smiled and welcomed us to the latter’s comfortable but simply furnished home, before offering my

two colleagues and I typical Middle Eastern hospitality.

What I had not expected was the honesty with which Priscilla then shared her inspiring yet deeply moving story.

As a child she was brought up in a wealthy family in Iran but suffered repeated sexual abuse at the hands

of family members. Because she was afraid of them, especially her mother, she felt unable to report what was going on and perhaps unsurprisingly by the age of 12 had fallen behind in her education.

At the age of 14 she began seeing different men as a way of finding the acceptance that her family had failed to provide. As a result she became what she described as ‘addicted to sex’ but although she prayed to God to be released from it nothing happened, perhaps because of her own impression of what God was like. ‘I saw God as a god of rage who would beat me up,’ she said.

Years later, however, as an adult she was surprised to hear that one of her old friends had become a Christian. ‘I met her and asked her why she, as





*a Muslim, was doing this and she told me about Jesus and that you could be forgiven. So I went to the church with her and when I entered it I cried non-stop and asked Jesus to free me from this sexual addiction.'*

In fact she ended up staying with her friend simply to be able to go to the church.

When she did finally tell her family about Jesus, there was even more

***'I stopped lying and gossiping and my whole life changed'***

rejection, with her mother and sister accusing her of blasphemy.

During that time, however, she had started watching Christian satellite

TV and on one occasion called the broadcaster. The gospel was explained to her and she gave her heart to Jesus and in that second was freed from her addiction. Not only that but *'I stopped lying and gossiping and my whole life changed'*.

Her mother continued to fight with her but Priscilla loved sharing her new faith with her relatives and as a result two members of her extended family accepted Christ.

The opposition took on a more sinister aspect, however, after Priscilla attended a conference in Turkey run by Release International's partners. She returned to Iran to find four men waiting for her at her workplace. *'I was scared and then one said he was from the intelligence services. I called my pastor and said: "They are coming after me."*

Her laptop and other devices were confiscated and she was arrested.

*'They took me to a strange place and blindfolded me and made me sit in a dark room until 1am, during which time they questioned me,'* she said.

Priscilla's back was towards the door when a group of men entered the room and began to ask more questions. She was so scared that she started crying. They said they would let her go as long as she returned the next day and they instructed her to sign a paper saying she would stop sharing her faith.

After attending another conference abroad the same thing was to happen. She was visited at her home by a group of officials who took her away in handcuffs. *'They took me to a place used to detain people involved with drugs crimes.'*

There she was stripped and made to perform sit-ups for no apparent reason other than to humiliate her. Priscilla, who was afraid of being raped, said: *'I was begging them [to stop] but they did not care.'*

In another room, she faced a number of threats. *'They told me I had to tell them about all the Christians I had been in contact with, otherwise I knew what would happen.'*

*'I was questioned for four to five hours but lost all awareness of time because I was so frightened. I told them the only Christians I knew were from the Netherlands not Iran but they accused me of lying, asking how I knew [Release International's partner].'*

After nine days they sent her to prison where she was initially housed with four other women in a cell measuring 12 square metres, which included a shower and toilet.

*'There was no ventilation and they kept a spotlight in the ceiling on for 24 hours a day so you could not sleep.'*

However, during the next two and a half months she was in prison many of the 350 inmates came to Priscilla

***'I will go back to the prison, get the list of prisoners' names and tell them about Jesus!'***

to hear her story and she told them about her faith. She also discovered that she was not in prison for simply being a Christian but for talking about Christ to others.

As she reflected on her time in detention, Priscilla explained how God had used her to help many of the prisoners including one who was saved from execution after she prayed. Another woman who was also about to be hanged had her sentence commuted after Priscilla interceded for her.

At that point in our interview the memory of the two women becomes too upsetting for Priscilla and we agree to take a break.

I began again by asking whether she had found it easy to forgive those who had treated her so badly and she admitted that it had not been easy while in prison but that once free she was able to.

Given her experience, it would be understandable for her never to want to go anywhere near a prison again but that is not the case.

*Continued overleaf...*



*Despite having endured deep personal suffering in Iran, Priscilla wants to go back there when it is free and build up the church*  
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*'When Iran is free,' she declared, 'I will go back to the prison, get the list of prisoners' names and tell them about Jesus!'*

After she was released, Priscilla tried to run a small business but her laptop, phone and business products were confiscated. *'I had no control over anything,'* she said. *'Every month money was deducted from my bank account but there was nothing to show who was taking it. I felt they were raping me in a different way.'*

Faced with a bleak future of being monitored and not being able to earn a proper living, Priscilla had little choice but to leave Iran.

However, her decision to flee came at a cost. Ironically, despite their rejection of her, her biggest sadness was not being able to see her family.

*'The mother I had once hated – now my only desire was to hold her in my arms one more time,'* she said.

Someone else who has suffered

rejection from his family and spent time behind bars for sharing the gospel in Iran is 'Matthew'\*.

Fifteen years ago Matthew's life was in a 'bad place' but when his brother-in-law, a Christian who worked for him, tried to share the hope of salvation with him, he just laughed.

*'He was talking about Jesus all the time and I told him to be quiet but one day something just said to me: "Stop! Listen to him."*

*'So at the park I asked him to tell me about Jesus and at that moment I saw a person appear nearby. I realised it was Jesus Himself. My brother-in-law*

***'I told her I had found something that I couldn't sacrifice'***

*said that Jesus was alive, and I said, "I know, I can see Him with my own eyes". He said it was impossible as he couldn't see Jesus, but I said, "He's near to you"*

The pair then went to see his brother-in-law's pastor and after talking to him Matthew accepted Christ.

Shortly afterwards his troubles began: his wife's first reaction was to get divorced.

*'All my family left me and did not want any connection with me but I prayed for them. I shared my faith and the Bible with my wife but she took my son's hands and called me a pagan and said she didn't want to live with me any more.'*

*'I told her I had found something that I couldn't sacrifice and when she asked what it was, I replied, "A live God". Then she put her bags down and sat on the stairs and after three days she believed God like I did. That night she saw Jesus too!'*

After trying to share his faith with other family members, Matthew took the message to three cities in Iran. However, unbeknown to him,



agents of the Ministry of Information had him under observation as well as others who had come to faith.

When they were in church and preparing to worship, a woman wearing a face covering came into their meeting, followed by 20 other people carrying guns. *'They surrounded us and checked to see if we had any weapons like knives or firearms but we only carried Bibles,'* said Matthew.

They then accused the Christians of tempting other people with alcohol and half an hour later they arrested them and took them away in handcuffs to prison where they faced repeated interrogation.

Matthew could see the men who had been arrested with him but did not know what had happened to the women. It was only after a few days that they were transferred to the court and there a number of women were being sentenced. *'When the judge handed down a sentence of execution a lot of the women were shouting to Jesus to help them but the judge just spoke unpleasantly to them,'* he told me.

However, he said the police there asked two or three times every day for their testimonies and some of those who heard believed in Jesus. Because they had to review the Bible in order to charge the church members, officials had to read it and in doing so became believers!

*'When they arrested us there were a lot of Bibles around so they asked us about these and then asked to take them home.'*

A number of prison officers who came into contact with the Christians during their detention were also converted.

A month later the group was released although Matthew was placed under constant monitoring. He stayed in Iran for seven years but was told that if he was seen with a Bible again he would go straight back to prison. *'I ignored them,'* he said.

Eventually, however, the pressure of living under surveillance, not being able to call members of the church



*After seeing a vision of Christ, Matthew took the gospel to a number of cities in Iran*  
© Release International 2023

freely and being checked on took its toll. Friends and relatives also refused to see him and his family and Matthew realised the time had come to leave Iran.

There is more freedom in Matthew's new homeland but also a number of challenges, not least of which is trying to communicate in an unfamiliar language.

His son was also persecuted at his new school because he was not a Muslim and eventually was forced to leave; it has taken him two years to recover from the distress.

As our time together drew to a close, we prayed together before saying our goodbyes and Matthew helped us to carry our equipment to the car.

The joy of having spent time with such an inspiring brother in Christ was tinged with sadness that we would probably never see him and his family again.

*\*Name changed to protect the identity of those we serve*

## PRAY FOR IRAN

- For the church to be free to worship
- For God's protection on His people
- For strength and provision for believers such as Priscilla and Matthew who have been forced to flee Iran

## PLEASE HELP CHRISTIANS WHO HAVE BEEN FORCED TO FLEE PERSECUTION

These precious believers and their families need your prayers and gifts to survive - and rebuild their lives.

Your gift could provide:

- Food parcels for vulnerable families
- Pastoral care and Christian discipleship
- Vocational training to help believers start small businesses
- Support for believers such as Priscilla and Matthew to help them become active in ministry in a new location

To make a gift please use the enclosed form, call 01689 823491 or give online at [releaseinternational.org](https://releaseinternational.org)



# Sisters who chose Christ over freedom

*Eritrean Christian Aster lives with the memory not only of being tortured for her faith – but of her sister being beaten to death. Now she feels able to tell her story and share how, as a follower of Christ, she views her sufferings. Kenneth Harrod reports*

Sign a piece of paper. That's all it would have taken. But Aster and her twin sister Azieb refused to do so – and paid a terrible price. Both had been arrested for being part of a Christian gathering. Signing a document to renounce their faith would have meant freedom. 'For my sister and I it wasn't a temptation! It





*Aster feels like she has been given an extra life because she did not die in prison*

*never entered my mind to do so,' she says, as she looked back on what that decision would come to mean.*

Aster and Azieb, who were identical twins, were always very close. They even came to faith in Christ together. Having been brought up in the Orthodox Church they were given a Bible by a visitor to their parents'

home in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, and as a result they came to know Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord.

Like all young Eritreans they had to complete a term of national military service, which took them all over the country. Around that time they began seeking out Christian fellowship and eventually joined the Kale Hiwot Church. Azieb was soon appointed as an evangelist, and was sent to the small town of Adi Tekelezan, to do outreach work, while Aster became involved in prayer ministry at the home church. Gradually Aster began travelling with her sister.

In 2002 Azieb was arrested and briefly detained for worshipping with a group of about 100 Christians. She was released a few weeks later. But it was in 2006 that their lives were to change forever. The twins attended a celebration for a married couple who had been through a number of relational difficulties but who now wanted to celebrate their reconciliation. There were just over 30 people present.

*'The security forces were always spying on us and they knew this was a gathering of Christians,' said Aster. 'They arrested everybody – including even children and some who were new Christians. We were all taken to the local police station.'*

A few non-believers who had been at the celebration were released after a couple of days, while others were released if they were prepared to sign a statement renouncing their faith. Aster and Azieb were among those who refused to comply and as a result spent about three months in police cells. From there they were taken to a prison at Adi Abeto, near Asmara. *'We were there about four months. It was overcrowded and we struggled to get enough food for everyone. They were asking again and again when we would renounce our faith.'*

The sisters were then taken, with about 20 other Christians, to the Mai Serwa prison, where they were locked in shipping containers – scorching hot by day and freezing cold at night. It was at Mai Serwa that Aster and Azieb met Twen, another imprisoned

Christian, whose story we told in January's *Voice* magazine.

Aster recalls the conditions: *'They wouldn't open the door during the day and the window was very small. We were allowed out at 6am to go*

### ***'It was so hot the floor burned your feet'***

*to the toilet in an open field. Lunch was at 4pm and consisted of very watery lentils and very stony bread, which didn't taste very good at all! For breakfast they would pass tea and some bread through the window.*

*'Everything about it was bad: the food, the overcrowding; and it was always very smelly. The container itself was rusty and gave off an awful smell when it was hot. Whenever someone was ill, they didn't get proper treatment.*

*'They continued to pressure us to renounce our faith and, one by one, people did so and were leaving. It was all very difficult. We tried to encourage each other. We tried not to ask, "Why God?"; we tried to help one another to remain faithful.'*

One prisoner, a doctor, signed the security forces' form. He was then asked to convince others to sign, too. *'But it is very clear in the Bible that if we follow Jesus Christ we will be persecuted – so we were ready for that,'* Aster said.

About seven months later the sisters were moved to another prison, near the Red Sea coast. *'It was a very hot place and the conditions were even worse! We were not allowed to wear shoes and it was so hot the floor burned your feet.'*

The security forces imposed a variety of what Aster calls military-style punishments on the young women, including carrying heavy loads of firewood from the bush back to the prison camp.

When that didn't work they began beating them with whips made from lorry tyres. *'The first time three of us were called. It was dark. It was about 8 pm and we were taken to the woods.*

*Continued on p14*

# PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS IN

# FLIGHT



**UKRAINE:** Christians in the occupied and contested territories now face persecution from the Russian military and those supportive of the invasion. Thousands have escaped these regions and now live as internally displaced people.



**SYRIA:** Hundreds of thousands of Christians have fled Syria following years of civil war and persecution. Many now live in refugee camps in neighbouring states including Lebanon.

UKRAINE

TURKEY

SYRIA

KURDISTAN

LEBANON

JORDAN

EGYPT

**IRAQ:** The vast majority of Christians in Iraq have left the country since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Christians were ruthlessly targeted by Islamic State in 2014 and since then instability and violence have caused many to remain displaced in Kurdistan.

IRAQ



**NIGERIA:** Islamist militants continue to wage war against believers in north and central Nigeria. Thousands have been killed and hundreds of thousands now live in displacement camps.



BURKINA FASO

NIGERIA

CAMEROON

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

SUDAN

ERITREA

**ERITREA:** Persecution, forced military conscription and economic misery have driven thousands of Christians into refugee camps in Ethiopia and Sudan.

SOUTH SUDAN

ETHIOPIA



KENYA

SOMALIA

**SOMALIA:** Displacement is a major issue inside Somalia and persecution by Al-Shabaab militants has driven thousands more into Kenya.

**BURKINA FASO:** Violence against Christians in Burkina Faso has escalated dramatically since 2019. Jihadists attack villages and specifically target Christians. Many have been killed and thousands have been displaced.



Click on the QR code to support Christians who have been forced to flee



# IT

## 'Those who were scattered went about preaching the word.' Acts 8:4

### AFGHANISTAN:

Fearing an inevitable rise in persecution, many Christians fled to neighbouring countries when the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan in 2021.



**NORTH KOREA:** Practising Christian faith is forbidden in North Korea. As a result some Christians have defected and live undercover in China or make the perilous journey through South East Asia to South Korea.



NORTH KOREA

SOUTH KOREA



AFGHANISTAN

CHINA

PAKISTAN



**PAKISTAN:** Christians live as second class citizens in Pakistan. Some who have been accused of blasphemy or threatened with violence have fled to Thailand and several other countries.

THAILAND



MALAYSIA



SRI LANKA



People movements in-country and to other countries



Release International partner has provided help

Map shows selected movements of Christians displaced by war and persecution.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

**voice**  
of Persecuted Christians





Aster's sister Azieb, who was beaten to death in prison

Aster ended up in hospital for two weeks. Then she was sent back to the prison and the various punishments started all over again.

*'About two months later we had the second round of beating. There were three of us: me, my sister and a friend. They took my sister about 50 yards away and I could hear them beating her. I was being beaten at the same time. Then I lost consciousness again. I don't know how long they carried on beating Azieb. One of them had been beating me so hard he had to rest: he was tired!'*

Aster woke up in hospital again, but when she was returned to the prison

***'It is like I have been given an extra life'***

her friends told her that Azieb was dead. She had died while Aster was unconscious.

Aster remembers, *'I started praying to the Lord to help me. I started to isolate myself from others and started crying a lot. Eventually I felt the Lord assuring me that he had chosen my sister to be with Him – and that consoled me.'*

Eventually Aster was released from prison because of long-term ill health. She spent about 18 months in Asmara and then managed to flee to Sudan. From there she was eventually able to travel to Paris, where she now lives.

*'I tried to give some spiritual meaning to what had happened. No one has authority unless God allows it. If you are spiritually active you are going to get in trouble with the government [in Eritrea]. The person who beat my sister was full of anger. I felt sorry for them, because they didn't seem to have any soul.'*

*'I don't have any bitterness or grudges against them. They all seemed depressed. As for now, I have a good relationship with God and it is like I have been given an extra life because I might not have lived. So I will live for Him.'*

## **HOW WE HELP CHRISTIAN PRISONERS IN ERITREA**

Release International provides packages for Christian prisoners as well as financial support for families of prisoners and former prisoners.

*They separated us and then started. I don't remember how long they were beating me because I fainted. I think they carried on beating me.*

*'At first I had to lie on my stomach and they were beating me on my back. Eventually they beat me on my chest and I couldn't breathe. That's when I passed out. I was semi-conscious and I didn't know where I was. When I woke up they started beating me again. The whole thing lasted until midnight.'*



## HELPING CHRISTIANS IN FLIGHT

Women leave an Orthodox church ceremony in Asmara, Eritrea. The Orthodox church is one of only four permitted religious groups (stock photo)



time as well as two other children, was forced to hide for three months before she could escape the country and join her husband.

*'Along with the children I was able to get a minibus to the border with Ethiopia and then to a camp for Eritrean refugees,' she said.*

*'However, it was so hot that my children became unwell so we could only stay four months before we had to move on.'*

Thankfully Rehema was eventually reunited with her husband. Although the whole family are able to live together in a house, they struggle to make ends meet so it is hoped that the training Rehema – and others like her – received will enable them to obtain enough income to provide for their needs.

The training provided by our partners is an intensive three-month course offering a very high level of skill which is recognised by government.

*\*It is believed that there are about 500 believers in prison in Eritrea, many of whom are housed in inhumane conditions*

## Lifeline for Christian refugees

*A vocational course run by our partner provides Christians who have been forced to flee with hope of securing much-needed work*

**T**hanks to your generous support, our partner is able to provide vocational training for Christians who have been forced to flee Eritrea because of persecution by the authorities.

This education and resulting qualifications help to equip believers to find work in their new homeland and so provide much-needed income for themselves and their families.

One of those we met recently was a pastor's wife called 'Rehema'. We are not using her real name because even though she is no longer in Eritrea she still fears repercussions from the government there.

Rehema and her husband ran a small underground church at their home in a city hundreds of miles from the capital, Asmara, for five years.

*'Because we were not members of the four permitted religious groups (Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran and Sunni Islam) we were forbidden by the Government,' she told us.*

*'So we had to meet very discreetly. Members would arrive one by one and during our gatherings for discussion and prayer we had to be very quiet, and sing slowly and not too loudly. After the meeting, they would leave silently.'*

### A trap was being set

However, unbeknown to Rehema and her husband, some members of the church turned out to be government spies who eventually informed on them.

Realising a trap was being set for them, the pastor managed to escape the city and make his way out of the country but sadly members of the small church were arrested. Up to nine are still currently in prison.\*

Rehema, who had a small baby at the



*Praying for Rehema, who has been helped by Release International's partner*

### Please help Christians who have been forced to flee persecution and conflict

**These precious believers need your prayers and gifts to survive – and rebuild their lives.**

**Your gift could provide:**

- Vocational training to help believers start small businesses
- Vital food parcels
- Pastoral care and Christian discipleship

**To make a gift please use the enclosed form, call 01689 823491 or give online at [releaseinternational.org](http://releaseinternational.org)**

# Partners provide hope and a future for survivors

*From supplying food aid to providing victims of trauma with a new beginning, our partner Stefanos Foundation supports Nigerian Christians in their darkest hour.*  
**Tom Hardie reports**

Christians in central and northern Nigeria are continuing to face bloody and unrelenting violence – most notably today at the hands of militant Fulani herdsmen.

Each week we receive reports of further atrocities carried out against predominantly Christian communities. It seems the persecution is only intensifying in this two-decades-old story of Christian

suffering, but while the Nigerian authorities appear ineffective or even sometimes complicit in the violence, believers continue to respond with love and forgiveness towards their aggressors.

Jude Gudugudu, who lost his wife in a Fulani raid on his community in May 2021 as well as being severely injured himself, said he forgave those responsible.

*'I was asleep with my wife, Mary, when [Fulani militants] arrived. When I woke up I discovered that they had*

***'I forgive them. If God can forgive, who am I not to?'***

*completely surrounded the house and they started shooting where we were sleeping.*

*'We got out of bed and tried to cover the window so they wouldn't see us. Then we tried hiding in the corner but they kept on shooting until they shot her dead. Then they continued shooting, first at my leg, second my lap and then in my back. The fourth [bullet] went into my right eye.*





*Despite seeing his wife killed and suffering terrible injuries, Jude has forgiven his attackers*

*'They thought that I was dead and then they left until security came and took me to hospital. The whole community was attacked. They killed about eight people.'*

Of those who were shot Jude was the only one to survive and, despite the loss of his wife and the injuries he suffered, he holds no bitterness towards the perpetrators.

*'I forgive them. If God can forgive, who am I not to?'*

Jude asked for prayer for himself and his community. *'Maybe the prayers will touch the hearts of the herdsmen,'* he said.

To help the oppressed simply to carry

on – many like Jude have lost loved ones or been injured or driven from their homes – our partners provide them with vital practical as well as pastoral support.

Ladi Chohu, whose community was also raided by Fulani, told us: 'We were in our homes when militants started attacking our community and chasing people from their homes. Most of us were chased into the towns. While we were there, they were attacking our homes and destroying and setting them ablaze. And they burned all our homes.'

*'After the attack we came back to see if we could put things back together again but we couldn't. All our resources had been burned. All our money and everything was gone.'*

She added: *'Then the rains came and finished off the destruction. So we were struggling to put [our] home back together until the Stefanos Foundation [a Release International partner] came and helped us to rebuild.'*

*'We can't be sure of what Fulani militants might do in the future but we, the Christians, want this to be the end. We came back home and we are staying; and we are willing to stay in peace with them. We are trusting God that they will not be able to attack us again.'*

She said: *'I would like people in the UK to remember to pray for us; that what has happened will never be repeated. Pray that God will replenish what we have lost.'*

Mark Lipdo, head of Stefanos, described the changing shape of persecution over the past 20 years. The oppression had started in northern Nigeria with the denial of basic rights such as freedom to worship, then had focused on issues such as children's education and ultimately to the point where it became violent towards anyone who was not a Muslim.

As a result believers were attacked in their homes or on the street and forced off their land so they were not able to produce crops to feed themselves.

That's where the long-term help of Release international supporters has been so crucial.



*Release International partner Stefanos Foundation helped Ladi to rebuild her home*  
© Release International 2023

*'I much appreciate the support of Christians in the UK, particularly through the work of Release International to us at Stefanos,'* he said. *'Over two decades, we've tried to structure all that you send to us in three forms. We are committed to making sure that the voice of these people is heard ... hoping that other Christians will get to learn about their suffering and pray.'*

Secondly Stefanos advocates on their behalf with the Nigerian authorities and internationally; and thirdly, and critically, responds to the practical needs of the persecuted and displaced such as supplying food relief as well as meeting survivors' emotional needs.

Mark said: *'You can provide physical support, because you see that a roof has been burned down. But some wounds are internal. And people have come to live with them. You may see someone laughing but inside he has a secret heart wound. So we try to engage with them in those areas through trauma healing ... which enables them to have a new hope and a new beginning.'*

Like Jude and Ladi, Mark also appealed to UK Christians to pray, as well as *'to speak for persecuted Nigerian Christians within your churches, within your government,'* adding: *'We will continue to thank God for you as we bear this together to the end of the calling.'*



*The road more travelled: Central Asia is presenting an image of openness to the West but that brings new challenges for the church (stock photo)*

# **Slippery warning sign on the Silk Road**



## *A window of opportunity has opened up for the church in Central Asia but more openness comes with a price, pastors tell James Fraser*

**'S**ometimes freedom can be dangerous.' That was the sentiment shared by many of the church leaders I spoke to on a recent trip to Central Asia. During the past few years, Christians in several countries across this region have experienced a growing sense of freedom: some of the previous restrictions on church registration have been lifted, pastors are less likely to be harassed by the authorities and a certain level of respect for evangelicals is emerging in sections of society.

More generally the region is benefiting from a greater openness to the West. Modern developments in commerce and infrastructure and a bustling tourist trade along the ancient cities of the Silk Road present a perspective of Central Asia that is open and positive.

However, there are a number of qualifications to this general picture. First, it is not universal. While countries such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are at the front end of progress, Tajikistan, where it is still illegal for children to attend church, trails further behind, and Turkmenistan remains a highly restricted nation with an autocratic government and an underground church. Even within the more progressive nations there are anomalies. I heard of one congregation that has been trying to register for more than 20 years, and occasional police raids on church buildings are still being reported.

Secondly, the growing experience of freedom is relatively new. Several of the church leaders I spoke to shared vivid memories of darker days. Until recently Christian literature was regularly confiscated and destroyed by the authorities. One pastor said that he had to dig a hole in the ground to bury his Christian books in order to keep them out of sight. Other leaders had been fined or arrested and some had spent considerable time in prison. Many of the laws which enabled this kind of repression

in the past are still in place but are simply applied in less onerous ways. The church is all too aware that with a change of leader or foreign policy the situation could quickly revert to its former state. After years of operating underground they are unsurprisingly cautious about how vocally they should celebrate their greater freedom and they remain guarded in the public expression of their faith outside the church.

This restraint is, of course, understandable in a context where authoritarian government is not the only front of potential opposition. Some Christians I met had recently observed a growing interest in ideological forms of Islam in parts of the region. Traditionally the Islam of Central Asia is more cultural than credal. It is associated with social hierarchy, community loyalty and respect. Christian believers who come from this majority background already face opposition and pressure from their families and this could increase if more convictional forms of Islam take hold.

And yet, despite this backdrop of qualification and challenge, the church leaders I encountered are supremely conscious that their new experience of relative freedom has opened a real window of opportunity. Hospitality in Central Asia is highly valued and through many hours of conversation around the dinner table covering topics such as family, local history and stories of home, my various hosts articulated their vision for the church. Mission is at the forefront of their thinking. They want to train more pastors, plant more churches, express their faith in more acts of service, and share the gospel in more strategic, creative and Spirit-guided ways. They know their calling and they see the exciting potential for God's kingdom to grow across all sections of their society. It was inspiring to hear them communicate this vision with passion and a deep sense of responsibility.

However, along with their passion and



*A church meeting in Central Asia*

hope the pastors also have a degree of concern. They have sensed that during the past few years of increased freedom the spiritual temperature of the church has cooled. They feel that they are not relying on God as much as they used to, that their prayer times are not as urgent, that people are beginning to be distracted by material prosperity, and that contributing to the life of the church is no longer such a high priority.

I reflected a lot on these observations during my trip and thought about how it might apply to Christians in the UK. We have so much freedom. We may feel it is starting to be threatened but our brothers and sisters in Central Asia still face many more challenges. The question is: what are we doing with our freedom? Are we taking advantage of our opportunity to express our faith and openly share the love of Christ, or are the benefits of freedom distracting us?

One pastor made a wise observation which I think applies to Christians in any context: *'Freedom is not everything. My prayer is not for persecution to return but for the church to be holy. The church needs to learn how to be faithful in this moment and make the most of it.'*

### **Pray for Central Asia**

- For good Bible teaching and biblical faithfulness as the church grows
- For Christians to stay in the region and not be tempted to leave for material gain
- For the church to make the most of its current window of opportunity, to develop a vision for mission and to have the wisdom and courage to fulfil it



## Will you be a voice for the persecuted?

*Inspire your church to stand in the gap for oppressed believers*

**R**epresenting persecuted Christians is a vital role that many Release International volunteers play at their individual churches up and down the UK.

Acting as a voice for those who suffer they help to keep their congregations aware of what is happening to our persecuted family around the world as well as how Release International partners are helping them to persevere through the trials they face.

These Church Representatives might lead prayers for the persecuted, hand out the *Voice* magazine or provide updates on individuals who are suffering for the faith.

It's a key ministry but not every church has such an advocate, so that's why we would love to hear from you if you believe it is a role that God might be calling you to fulfil in your church.

Throughout the Bible we see God's heart for the oppressed, marginalised and rejected and He calls us to stand up for them – to be their voice.

Proverbs 31: 8-9 urges us to '*open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy*'.

If that is something on your heart then please do get in contact with us today.

Representing persecuted believers, as well as the ministry work of Release International, is also personally rewarding, as one of our volunteers, Alison, told us: '*I am incredibly blessed to work alongside an amazing group of local Release International volunteers who share my passion for supporting persecuted Christians*'.

*'It is my heart's desire to see the church become the hands and feet of Jesus in supporting our persecuted brothers and sisters and to stand in the gap in prayer.'*

Every time they give out one of our *Voice* magazines in church or raise the profile of persecuted Christians, Representatives are being a voice for those who are often unable to

speak up for themselves, calling their fellowships to support and pray. In fact many will have highlighted the plight of believers like Aster from Eritrea (see page 10) and those from Iran (see page 6) over the years, who have paid a high price for their faith.

There is great flexibility in the role, which can be adapted to different church settings.

Representatives might do one or more of the following:

- Distribute *Voice* magazine to their congregation or place on display in the church
- Display posters and/or prayer maps to help illustrate the worldwide persecution of Christians
- Be the point of contact in church for any speaker tours or local events
- Promote prayer in church and house groups
- Invite a speaker from Release International

We will provide you with all the resources you need to undertake the role so if you would like to join our dedicated team of Church Representatives or just explore a little more about what is involved then please contact us by emailing [volunteer@releaseinternational.org](mailto:volunteer@releaseinternational.org) or calling 01689 823491.





Further dates are now available for Artless Theatre Company's inspiring production, *If Prison Walls Could Speak*, the dramatic recounting of Release International partner Petr Jasek's imprisonment in Sudan in 2015. Check our website, [releaseinternational.org/artless-theatre-tour](http://releaseinternational.org/artless-theatre-tour) for further information on dates and venues in the UK. The production, which will be on tour until the end of this year, is based on Petr's testimony, as told in the book *Imprisoned with ISIS*, which is available from our website store.

## International Day of Prayer

Later this year Release International will again be taking part in an online event to mark the International Day of Prayer for the persecuted church (IDOP).

Since the mid-1990s IDOP has been marked, in November, by Christians around the world as a way of remembering the plight of, and focusing prayer on, the needs of persecuted Christians.

In recent years Release International has joined with other agencies in the UK to produce an online presentation. This year's IDOP event will be streamed on the evening of Sunday, November 5 (7.30pm). The Evangelical Alliance will again be hosting the event, which in addition to Release International's will include contributions from Open Doors and CSW. Details on how to register to watch will be available nearer the time.

As we have done for a number of years, we will also provide a range of IDOP materials on our website that you can download to use in your church in order to participate during the month of November.

## Scale of the problem

The phrase we most often heard from visitors to our stand at the Spring Harvest event earlier this year was: *'I didn't know persecution was on this scale!'*

Which all goes to show how important it is to take the message out to a church in the UK that is still largely unaware of what is happening to our family across the world.

Please do pray for us as we continue to attend conferences and other events around the UK throughout 2023, raising awareness and engaging churches and individuals in the task of loving and serving persecuted Christians.

We will be at the Keswick Convention (July 15-August 4); New Wine (July 26-30 and August 1-5); Refuel (July 24-27); New Horizon (August 5-11) and Bangor Worldwide (August 18-27). Feel free to come say hello at our stand. We'd love to see you.

## New website clicks into place

Release International's website is changing! During the past few months we have been working with developers on a new-look site, which is due to go live early in July.

One of the exciting features of our new online home will be an interactive globe. This will enable you to click on a country for prayer pointers, as well as background information on that country, what it is like to be a Christian there and the work Release International is supporting.

The website will feature new articles that explain our ministry and background. All the familiar news pages, information, resources and our online store will continue to be part of the new site.

Do take time to visit the website ([releaseinternational.org](http://releaseinternational.org)).



## INVITE A SPEAKER

Our team of experienced speakers are available to join your church or online meeting to help you support and pray for persecuted Christians. They would love to hear from you!

### *Ireland:*

Stephen on 028 9334 0014 or 07933 313169

### *London & South:*

Jonny on 07861 656269

### *Midlands & North:*

Allister on 07916 396178

### *Scotland:*

James on 07434 894016

### *Wales & West of England:*

Paul on 07861 651139

## THE WORD

**How can persecuted Christians display such godly peace? The answer lies in the context of a familiar verse, says Release International's Kenneth Harrod**

# Finding contentment in the hardest places

**I**t is a well-known Bible verse that you will often find adorning Christian coffee mugs, attractive plaques for your living room wall, or on inspirational posters ... and yet it is a Bible verse that is often misunderstood, or misused.

Towards the end of his letter to the Philippians the Apostle Paul declares, *'I can do all things through him who strengthens me.'* (Philippians 4:13).

Removed from its context and taken in isolation (as it often is) this verse can easily be read as inspiration for personal achievement: I can fulfil all my dreams and achieve all my goals through the strength that God gives me! With God on my side, nothing can stop me!

A moment's examination of the context of this familiar verse, however, yields a somewhat different understanding of what Paul is saying. Towards the end of his letter, written while in prison, Paul expresses thankfulness that his readers have been concerned for him. Then he goes on to say:

*'...I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.'* (Philippians 4:11-13)

Far from being about God helping us achieve our goals and ambitions,

Paul's familiar maxim is all about *contentment*.

It is, perhaps, easier to be content when you have more than you need. Christians who have lost everything (and sometimes everyone) and who continue to display a godly contentment show us the real power Paul is expressing.

I have met Christians in Nigeria who have been forced to flee their homes and villages, in the face of attack by militant Islamists. They are now living in camps for the internally displaced in their own country, often dependent on people like Release International's partners to provide them with basic necessities – and yet they continue to display a godly contentment.

Recently I had the privilege of meeting Aster, from Eritrea. She

was beaten unconscious for her faith and woke up to hear that her sister – also a Christian – had been beaten to death. Prolonged ill-health had provided the only key out of a barbaric Eritrean prison. She had fled to Sudan and then on to Paris, and to an unfamiliar culture. But her faith – and her *contentment* – were apparent.

When we hear of Christians who have been forced to flee it is right to want to help meet their practical needs, such as through the work Release International supports. It is also right to pray for the provision of those needs.

However, let's not forget to pray that the God who sustains His people will also grant them true and godly peace and contentment. And, yes, let's pray that for ourselves, too.

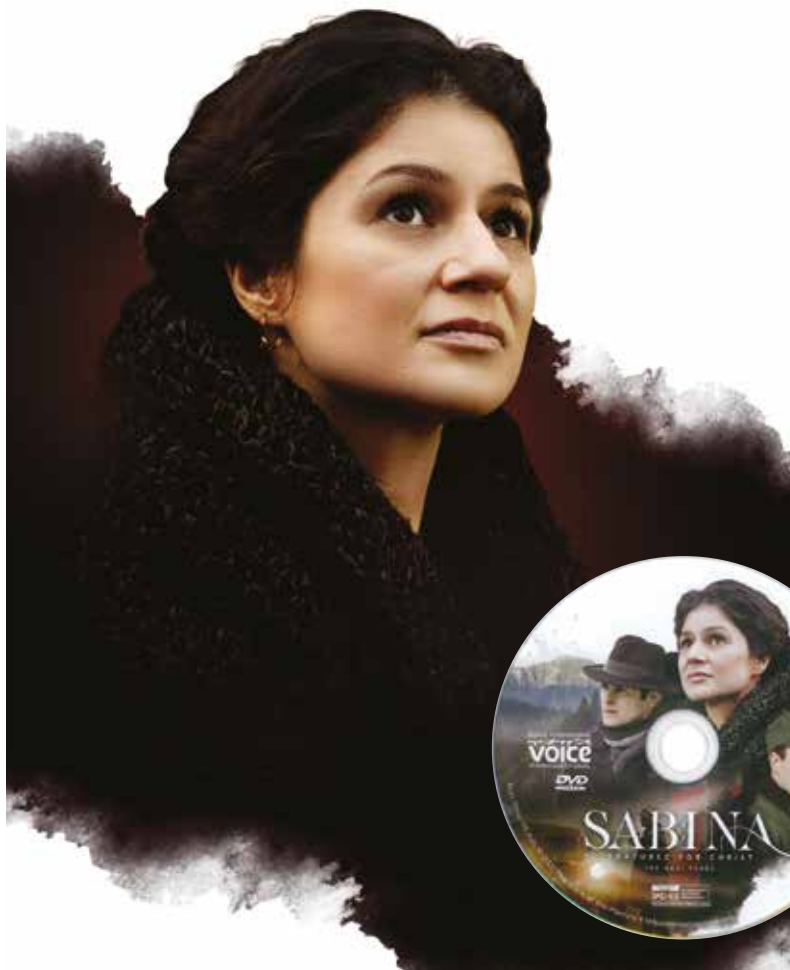
## INSPIRING FAITH



*'Whoever has known the spiritual beauty of the Underground Church cannot be satisfied anymore with the emptiness of some Western churches.'*

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





# SABINA

TORTURED FOR CHRIST  
THE NAZI YEARS

## New Discipleship Course

- Brand new Discipleship course based on the DVD *Sabina - Tortured for Christ (the Nazi years)*
- Contains film DVD and course study booklet
- Available for just £10 using the insert card or by calling 01689 823491

## Regular support is vital

Regular giving (even small amounts) through a Direct Debit helps us to plan ministry support around the world. It is a great way to show ongoing love and concern for persecuted believers.

### giftaid it

In order to Gift Aid your donation you must tick a box below. I want to Gift Aid my donation:

☐ today ☐ today, and any donations I make in the future or have made in the past 4 years.

I am a UK taxpayer and understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations in that tax year it is my responsibility to pay any difference. Please notify us if you: • want to cancel this declaration • change your name or home address • no longer pay sufficient tax on your income and/or capital gains • no longer pay Income Tax at the higher or additional rate and want to your Gift Aid donations on your Self-Assessment tax return or ask HM Revenue and Customs to adjust your tax code.

Name   
Date

**Thank you!**

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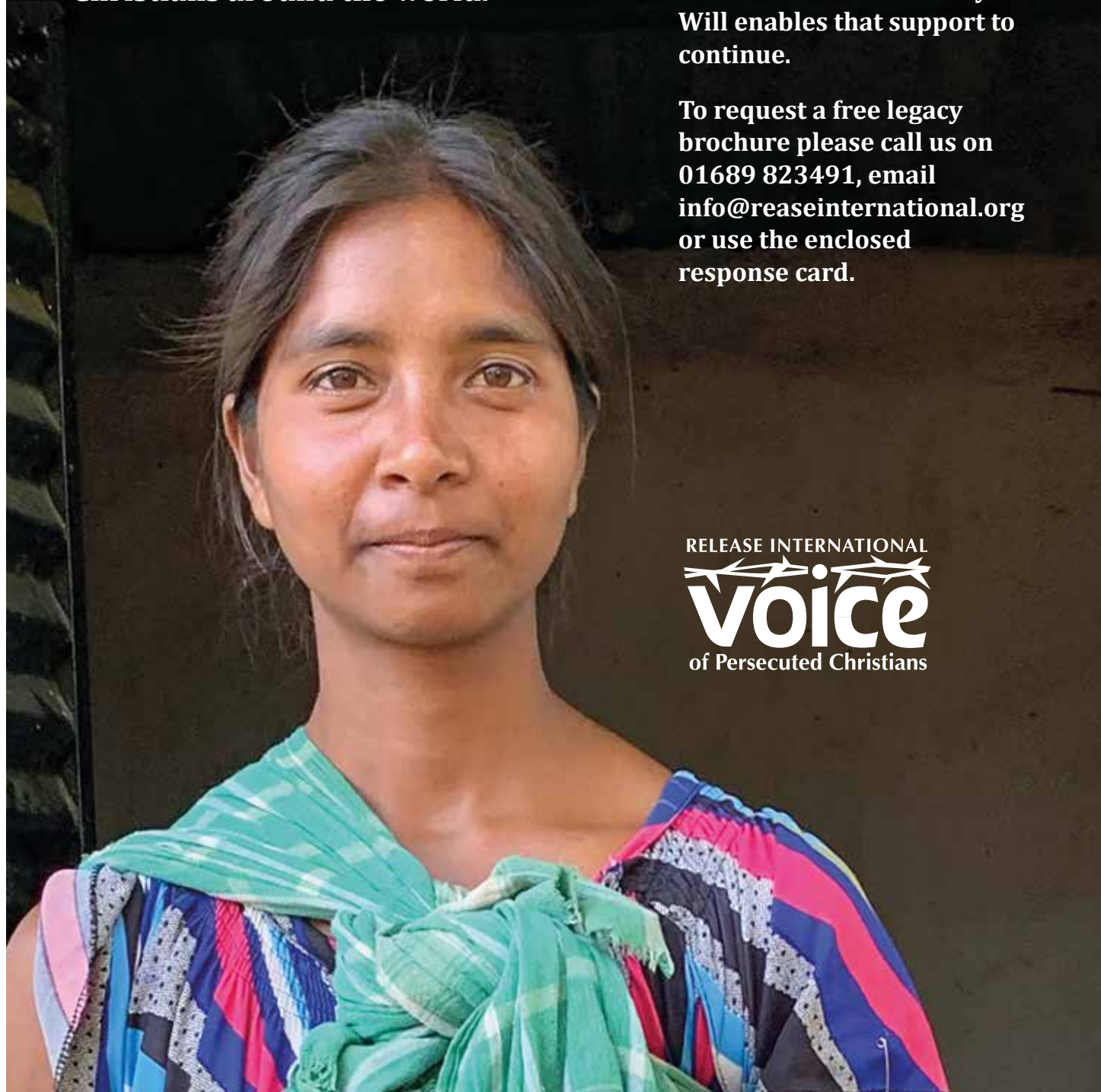
Use the tear-off section of the letter or the Connect and Support card to set up your Direct Debit. Please make sure you include your name and address on the card.

# *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 sharing God's love and compassion with persecuted Christians around the world.**

**Your support enables our partners to provide prayerful, pastoral and practical help to persecuted Christians in over 25 countries. Including a gift to Release International in your Will enables that support to continue.**

**To request a free legacy brochure please call us on 01689 823491, email [info@releaseinternational.org](mailto:info@releaseinternational.org) or use the enclosed response card.**



RELEASE INTERNATIONAL  
**Voice**  
of Persecuted Christians



# prayershield

July – September 2023



*Marten Solon was killed by Islamist militants in Indonesia, leaving his wife Maria and sons Derianto and Antoni to fend for themselves*

## JULY 2023

*Heavenly Father,  
I praise you, Lord, because  
You have authority over  
all the earth. Your name  
is higher than every other  
name.*

*Thank You for giving us  
authority to 'overcome all  
the power of the enemy'  
(Luke 10:19).*

*Lord, remind Your people who  
are suffering persecution  
today that that same  
authority is vested in them.  
May they know that they  
are 'more than conquerors  
through Him who loved us'  
(Romans 8:37).*

*Amen*

## INDONESIA

**SATURDAY 1:** Pray for Christians in Central Sulawesi whose highland village is very close to the base of East Indonesian Mujahideen (MIT) militants who have killed several local believers.

**SUNDAY 2:** Pray for coffee farmer Maria (pictured with two of her sons) whose husband Marten and brother Simson were killed by MIT militants in Kalemago, Central Sulawesi.

**MONDAY 3:** 'Kila' in Kalemago was traumatised after being held captive and threatened by MIT and witnessing local murders. Thank God for His healing power at work in Kila. 'I know God still has a plan for my life,' he says.

**'WE WILL REMAIN  
FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST  
NO MATTER WHAT  
HAPPENS.'**

*Dewi, whose father Marten  
Solon was martyred,  
Indonesia*

**TUESDAY 4:** Pray that God will touch the hearts of militants and other Islamist hardliners determined to eradicate Christianity from Central Sulawesi.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL  
**voice**  
of Persecuted Christians

**WEDNESDAY 5:** Praise God that the Gereja Kristen Indonesia (GKI) Yasmin Church in Bogor has opened its new church building – after 15 years of opposition from local officials. An application for the church was approved in 2006 – then obstructed by the authorities.

**THURSDAY 6:** Pray for Simalungun Christian Protestant Church in Cigelam which officials forcibly shut recently due to pressure from local residents.

**FRIDAY 7:** Current requirements for obtaining permission to build houses of worship in Indonesia are nearly impossible to attain for most small, new churches. Pray that churches' applications will find favour in local administrations.

**SATURDAY 8:** It is often local officials in Indonesia who oppose new places of Christian worship. Pray that the Government will do more to uphold religious freedoms.

**SUNDAY 9:** Pray that politicians will not be willing to succumb to pressure to persecute churches in order to win votes ahead of local and national elections in 2024.

**MONDAY 10:** Pray for wisdom for leaders of Mawar Sharon Christian Church in Tarakan city, Borneo Island, whose plans for a new worship hall have been opposed by local residents.

**TUESDAY 11:** Thank God that East Java Christian Church has won the right to construct a building in East Java province,



*Distributing Bibles in Iran risks arrest or imprisonment*

despite initial opposition from local residents.

**WEDNESDAY 12:** Pray for churches in Indonesia involved in evangelistic outreach which are a particular target for Islamist extremist groups.

## IRAN

**THURSDAY 13:** Ask God to protect the many courageous Christians in Iran who boldly share God's word despite the constant risk of arrest and imprisonment.

**FRIDAY 14:** Thank God for the acquittal on appeal of Christian couple Homayoun Zhavah and Sara Ahmadi. They had been sentenced to two and 11 years respectively for house church activities, after their arrest in 2019.

**SATURDAY 15:** Thank God that the judge in the appeal of Homayoun Zhavah and Sara Ahmadi (above) said their church activities were 'not considered as acts against the

country's security'. Pray that more members of the judiciary will take this view.

**SUNDAY 16:** Thank God for the release of Christian convert Milad Goodarzi in a prisoner amnesty. He had been sentenced to five years in jail in 2021 for 'engaging in propaganda against the Islamic regime'.

**MONDAY 17:** Pray for six Christian converts known to have been released in a recent prisoner amnesty. Pray that their ordeal will only strengthen their faith.

**TUESDAY 18:** Christian leaders and pastors in Iran are often arrested, tortured and imprisoned, and their families harassed. Pray that this will not deter others from joining the ministry.

**WEDNESDAY 19:** Many of the Christians presently in Iranian prisons are there because of their involvement in house churches. Pray that persecution will lead to growth in this church movement.



## PAKISTAN

**THURSDAY 20:** Pray for the congregation of The Voice of Jesus Church in Khokhar: a 40-strong mob raided a service recently, firing guns. Thank God no one was hurt.

**FRIDAY 21:** Police reportedly dismissed the recent violent attack on The Voice of Jesus Church (above) as a 'fight between kids'. The pastor says harassment is common. Pray that officials will take seriously their responsibility to defend religious rights.

**SATURDAY 22:** Pray for the four children of Basharat Masih, a single parent who was murdered in April. His family suspect he was killed after the man who forcibly married Basharat's 12-year-old daughter was brought to justice.

**SUNDAY 23:** Pray for Christian Mussarat Bibi and Muslim Muhammad Sarmad, work colleagues facing blasphemy charges in Punjab province. They burnt papers to clear a storeroom at the school where they worked, not realising they included Koranic pages.

**MONDAY 24:** Continue to pray for a change in Pakistan's blasphemy laws, despite strong resistance to reform by hardline political forces.

**TUESDAY 25:** Pray for the work of our partner in northern tribal Pakistan which is supporting persecuted believers by developing and distributing Christian materials in different formats, from print to audio.

## NIGERIA

**WEDNESDAY 26:** Pray for all those bereaved and injured by Fulani militants who launched a nine-day killing spree across Benue state in early April, killing 134 Christians.

**THURSDAY 27:** Rev Yakubu Shuaibu of the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria (EYN) was killed by Islamic State West Africa Province who broke into his house in Borno state. Ask God to heal his pregnant wife who was shot and wounded, and provide for her.

**FRIDAY 28:** Fulani militants killed 12 people in attacks on predominantly Christian villages in Kokona County, Nasarawa state, over four days. Many homes were destroyed. Pray for the hundreds of villagers who were displaced.

**SATURDAY 29:** Pray for communities in Plateau state who endured 11 days of attacks in April at the hands of Fulani militants; 18 people were killed.

**SUNDAY 30:** Pray for a full recovery for Rev Gwong Dachollom of the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in Darwat, Plateau, who was ambushed, shot and attacked with a machete in late April.

**MONDAY 31:** In 2022, Nigeria ranked highest in the world for the number of Christians killed for their faith. Pray that this shocking statistic will compel the authorities to intervene to stop the bloodshed.

## AUGUST 2023

## INDIA

**TUESDAY 1:** Thank God for the overcoming faith of Kamla (pictured) who still trusts God despite the murder of her husband, Pastor Shankar – and prays for the churches he planted in central India.

**WEDNESDAY 2:** Ask God to minister deeply to Christians coming to terms with violence they experience or see. Pastor Shankar's daughter-in-law witnessed his brutal murder by extremists.

**THURSDAY 3:** Pray for Christians in Manipur, north-east India, where 60 people were killed and 50 churches were burnt or destroyed during widespread violence in early May.

**FRIDAY 4:** The Evangelical Fellowship of India has called for an agency to be set up to monitor attacks against Christians. Pray for concerted action to stop anti-Christian violence.

**SATURDAY 5:** At a recent Supreme Court hearing, the Government denied Christians are persecuted in India, dismissing their troubles as 'personal disputes'. Pray that it will do more to ensure the security of all citizens.

**SUNDAY 6:** Continue to pray for the review or repeal of anti-conversion laws which have now been passed in 12 Indian states. They are often misused to persecute Christians.

**MONDAY 7:** Ask God to protect leaders such as Bishop Joseph



*Kamla continues to pray for churches in India planted by her martyred husband*

D’Souza of the Good Shepherd Church in India who have been willing to speak out against anti-Christian violence.

**TUESDAY 8:** Pray for a recently married Christian couple who were arrested at their wedding in Uttar Pradesh, along with nine pastors present (including the bride’s father). Hindu nationalists claimed the wedding was a ‘conversion event’.

**WEDNESDAY 9:** Pray that senior leaders in Hindu nationalist

groups who oppose Christians in India will relent and call an end to their persecution.

SUDAN

**THURSDAY 10:** Pray that God will build His church in Sudan where there are estimated to be 2 million Christians. Conservative Islam still dominates society.

**FRIDAY 11:** Pray for Awatif Abdalla Kaki who was chained up in her home in Omdurman, subjected to electrical shocks

**‘As believers, we all have to carry a cross.’**

*Kamla, widow of murdered pastor Shankar, India*

and had her four children taken away – for becoming a Christian earlier this year.

**SATURDAY 12:** Pray that believers will be a strong witness to God’s love for Sudan amid the current conflict, a power struggle between two prominent generals.



**SUNDAY 13:** The Sudanese Government has long persecuted Christians and ethnically African people in the contested Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile and Darfur regions on its border with South Sudan. Pray for a peaceful resolution in this troubled area.

## SRI LANKA

**MONDAY 14:** Pray for a Pentecostal house church in Dodangoda, made up of about seven families, who face opposition from local Buddhist monks.

**TUESDAY 15:** Pray that the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard the hearts and minds of Sri Lanka's Christians so they can demonstrate God's love.

**WEDNESDAY 16:** Pray for the Jesus Calls You Church in Abepradesa, Anuradhapura district, which has long faced harassment from local officials. They claim it is operating illegally and have threatened it with demolition.

**THURSDAY 17:** Ask God to bless the work of our partner in Sri Lanka who provides legal support for persecuted Christians, including lobbying for religious freedom.

**FRIDAY 18:** Pray that the church in Sri Lanka will be a beacon of light amid a devastating economic crisis.

**SATURDAY 19:** Ask God to speak to the hearts of local authorities and residents

who oppose the presence of Christianity in this mainly Buddhist nation.

## ERITREA

**SUNDAY 20:** Pray for the release of 103 young people arrested in Asmara where they had gathered to record worship songs for YouTube. Their meeting was deemed illegal.

**MONDAY 21:** More than 500 Christians are believed to be behind bars in Eritrea: many have been detained arbitrarily for many years. Pray for their release.

**TUESDAY 22:** Pray that all those involved with Christian prisoners in Eritrea – including fellow inmates, guards and court staff – will be touched by their witness.

**WEDNESDAY 23:** Pray for the family of Pastor Tesfay Seyoum who died of a brain tumour while serving a jail sentence. He had spent ten years behind bars. His family could not bury him in a cemetery in his home town because of his faith.

**THURSDAY 24:** The Eritrean Government continues to try to infiltrate underground churches and imprison their leaders. Ask God to thwart their efforts.

**FRIDAY 25:** Pray that the gospel message will continue to spread throughout Eritrea, so that many more will know God's love and His truth.

## IRAQ

**SATURDAY 26:** Christians in central and southern parts of Iraq, especially those with a Muslim background, are under constant threat of violence. Ask God to protect and sustain them.

**SUNDAY 27:** Pray for Jagarkhuin Abdulrahman Ismael from Duhok, Kurdistan, whose appeal against a conviction for defamation, linked to social media posts, was rejected recently.

**MONDAY 28:** Bahzad Mziri, an Anabaptist bishop in Duhok, was charged with blasphemy relating to a social media comment. Bishop Bahzad has apologised, saying it was made on his behalf without his approval. Pray the charge will be dropped.

**TUESDAY 29:** Pray that God will protect Bishop Bahzad (above) and his Duhok church from retaliation by militant Islamic groups. The church has had to curtail its public activities.

**WEDNESDAY 30:** Praise God that, though Islamic State militants destroyed every Bible they could find in Iraq, it is believed that far more Bibles have been distributed since, thanks to Release International associate ministries and others.

**THURSDAY 31:** Pray that as Iraqi people grow weary of conflict and corruption, and search for hope and truth, they will find Christ.

## SEPTEMBER 2023

### CHINA

**FRIDAY 1:** Pray for believers in China who are resisting concerted government efforts to 'sinicise' the church, to bring it in line with the officially atheist Communist Party.

**SATURDAY 2:** Thank God for the bold faith of elderly believer Brother Wang who resisted pressure from officials in Shanxi province to testify against his pastors in Xi'an Church of Abundance. He was tied to a chair for 24 hours and threatened.

**SUNDAY 3:** Thank God that Pastor Pan Yongguang and 59 other members of the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church (also known as the Mayflower Church), who spent months in exile in South Korea, have now been granted temporary asylum in the US.

**MONDAY 4:** Pray for Xu Feng, principal of Maizi Christian Music High School, who was arrested in 2021 and charged with 'illegal business operations'. His lawyer reports Xu is suffering allergies due to poor nutrition in jail.

**'May God remember you and keep you. Please continue to pray for God's blessing on each other.'**

*Hao Ying, wife of Chinese prisoner of faith Geng Zejun, to those who prayed for them*

**TUESDAY 5:** Pray for Christian lawyer Yang Hua who has been fined £32,000 for buying and selling second-hand books. He is well known for defending Christian human rights cases, including that of Early Rain Covenant Church.

**WEDNESDAY 6:** Prominent Christian lawyer Li Heping and his wife, Wang Qiaoling, were forcibly evicted from their Beijing home in April. Pray that God will answer Wang's prayer that they can 'live and work in peace and contentment'.

**THURSDAY 7:** Officials broke up five separate meetings of the Guangzhou Bible Reformed Church in May and interrogated church members. Pray for this congregation: their church was banned in 2018, their building confiscated.

**FRIDAY 8:** Pray for veteran democracy activist and Christian Zhu Yufu who was recently barred from visiting his terminally ill sister in Japan. He remains under house arrest after 16 years of detention at home and in jail.

**SATURDAY 9:** Thank God for the release of Uyghur pastor Alimujiang Yimiti after 15 years in jail in Xinjiang province. Pray for him and his family as they readjust to life together.

**SUNDAY 10:** Thank God for the release of Pastor Geng Zejun after 15 months

in prison for 'organising illegal gatherings'. He had refused to join the state-controlled Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

**MONDAY 11:** Ask God to strengthen and heal church elder Hu Shigen, who has been released after almost eight years in jail for 'subversion of state power'. In total he has spent more than 24 years in prison. He suffered a heart attack in jail in 2019.

### VIETNAM

**TUESDAY 12:** Pray for the many believers in Vietnam whose lives are threatened and endangered for following Jesus.

**WEDNESDAY 13:** Nga was murdered recently, allegedly by her husband, after she became a Christian. She was the first in her village to respond to the gospel after a visit by missionaries. Pray that many others, including Nga's husband and four children, will turn to Christ.

**THURSDAY 14:** Members of tribal religions are under pressure to evict Christian relatives from their communities, separating them from friends, family and livelihoods. Pray that more people will start to stand up for religious liberty.

**FRIDAY 15:** Please continue to pray for Hmong Christians in Nghe An province who are being severely persecuted. Officials are reportedly trying to create 'Christian-free zones'.





*Motorbikes enable evangelists in Vietnam to travel further and more safely to share the gospel*

**SATURDAY 16:** Pray for members of the not-yet-legally recognised Vietnam Good News Mission Church and the state-recognised Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North (ECVN-N), who regularly suffer persecution.

**SUNDAY 17:** Pray for steadfast faith for two families in Ky Son district, Nghe An province, who have been regularly pressured and persecuted since joining the ECVN-N church.

**MONDAY 18:** Pray for justice for persecuted Christians. Pray that local officials will be forced to uphold religious liberties according to the national Law on Belief and Religion.

**TUESDAY 19:** Pray for two pastors in Vietnam who have brought the gospel to a

remote Hmong community. Their work has been hugely helped by motorbikes donated by Release International associate ministries.

**WEDNESDAY 20:** Pray that the Bibles distributed by pastors among new Hmong believers through one of our associate ministries will bring new life and fresh hope to communities.

## UGANDA

**THURSDAY 21:** As the influence of radical Islam grows in Uganda, pray for the many churches that are reaching out to their communities and training members in how to share the gospel.

**FRIDAY 22:** Pastor Adinani Bulwa was killed in Bugiri district, allegedly by relatives

## 'I refused to renounce Jesus as the Son of God.'

*Shaquru Ndifuna, attacked for refusing to deny Christ, Uganda*

angry he had left Islam. He had recently returned to his home village after fleeing Muslim opposition in northern Uganda. Pray for his wife, Zabiina, and their children.

**SATURDAY 23:** Pray for healing for former Islamic teacher Shaquru Ndifuna from Iganga district, eastern Uganda, who was beaten unconscious by Islamist extremists after he became a Christian.

**SUNDAY 24:** Pray that God will provide for the thousands of Christians with a Muslim background who have been shunned by their communities and have lost their jobs.

**MONDAY 25:** Pastor John Balidawa and his son Gilbert, aged 14, were hospitalised after extremists attacked them and destroyed their church, Ebenezer Christian Centre, in Kigulu, eastern Uganda. Pray this church will not be cowed.

**TUESDAY 26:** Extremists exploded a petrol bomb during an evening service at a Pentecostal church in Biguli, western Uganda. Thank God no one was hurt, though part of the building was damaged.

**WEDNESDAY 27:** Pray for the family and friends of Jeremiah Mwanga, aged 24, a student at the Uganda Christian School



*Christian graduates from a vocational training scheme run by one of our associate ministries receive the gift of equipment to start their own business*

of Professionals in northern Uganda, who was killed in his room after sharing about Christ with Muslims.

**THURSDAY 28:** Pray for the Muslim student identified only as Chengalat who has been charged with killing Jeremiah Mwanga (above). Pray that he will know God's mercy and love.

**FRIDAY 29:** An evangelist called Engineer Herbert was stabbed

to death in Sironko district – apparently by extremists angered by his outreach work. Pray that others will continue Engineer's work.

**SATURDAY 30:** Pray for a vocational scheme, run by Release International associate ministries, which trains persecuted Christians in skills such as sewing, cooking and hairdressing (pictured).

Sources: AsiaNews; China Aid; International Christian Concern; Middle East Concern; Morning Star News; Release International partners and contacts; UCA News; VOM Australia; VOM Canada; VOM USA.

Some names 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.

*Lord Jesus*

*Thank You for watching over Your people, over our 'coming and going now and forevermore'. You never slumber nor sleep (Psalm 121:4-8).*

*Your word says that Your eye ranges across the earth looking 'to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed' to You (2 Chronicles 16:9).*

*Breathe Your life and Your love into those who are weary, Lord; renew a steadfast spirit in those who face relentless oppression and suffering.*

*Amen*

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