

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

OCT-DEC 2023

voice

of Persecuted Christians

**HELPING
PRISONERS
OF FAITH
AND THEIR
FAMILIES**

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



Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

Standing with the prisoners

In 1967 Richard Wurmbrand published his moving account of life in prison in Romania under communism. *Tortured for Christ* is a powerful, challenging and at times harrowing read but today, more than 50 years later, Christians are enduring the same brutalities around the world. Perhaps little has changed because the dedication of believers globally to share the gospel no matter what the consequences has not altered either.

As you can read in this special prisoner-focused edition of *Voice*, our dear brothers and sisters in places such as Eritrea, China, North Korea and Pakistan are paying a high price for their commitment to worshipping Christ and sharing the good news. We can, and we must, stand with them in prayer and, if God moves your heart, then please also give to support our work helping them and their families in their darkest hour. You can find out the difference your gifts make on pages 10-11.

Like Richard's book, our feature on prisoners can be difficult to read: discovering that the Eritrean authorities hold Christians in prison to break their spirit and that when they are released sometimes they are unable to rejoin the Christian community is immensely saddening.

Yet at the same time I'm grateful for Mebrhit's story on page 7. Despite signing a form to renounce her faith in order to secure her release, she has been restored to God and now serves in ministry to help others come to Christ. As the Apostle Peter found after denying the Lord, there is restoration for those who turn back to Him. That can be such an encouragement to us when we feel we've let God down or even, under pressure, denied Him.

Thank God too for the words of Chinese believers such as pastor Li Jie on page 8 who told his wife: *'The prison is where I meet with God and experience His Grace!'*

Of course, as well as praying and giving we can also take specific action at times to help our persecuted family. One of those who is serving a long prison term in North Korea is Deacon Jang. See how you can help him on page 9.

I would also encourage you to join us for the International Day of Prayer for the persecuted church (IDOP) on November 5. The special online event will include a film featuring former Eritrean prisoner Twen Theodros (see page 21), whose story we covered in January's *Voice* magazine.



CHRISTMAS CATALOGUE

Please use the enclosed leaflet to order your Christmas cards and gifts and so help persecuted believers. NB: you can order these items online, over the phone or by post but please make sure to use the contact details as given on the leaflet.

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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

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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.

Release International: PO Box 54, Orpington BR5 4RT T: 01689 823491 E: info@releaseinternational.org

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Faith under fire

Believers fear reprisals for seeking registration

Churches in Kyrgyzstan are still struggling to gain state registration or are afraid of state reprisals if they seek registration. Against international human rights law, the regime's laws state that religious communities are illegal and cannot operate unless they have state permission to exist.

Protestant leaders, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that many smaller churches have not sought state registration as they are 'afraid of state reprisals for themselves as communities as well as their members'. They fear that if regime agencies are given – as is required – the personal details of 200 founders this will lead to state surveillance of their private lives, and possible later targeting by the regime.

Some churches have not applied for registration on principle, as they consider this will lead to state interference. Other smaller churches have not applied as they do not have the 200 founders required by the Religion Law. Fears of state reprisals have grown since 2019.

(Source: Forum 18)



In recent years, more than 1,500 crosses have been torn down from authorised churches in one province alone. A fresh wave of cross demolitions is set to begin

New laws tighten China's grip on the church

China is cracking down on the Church in new measures designed to control religious groups and limit their freedom, which came into effect on September 1.

The new rules, announced by the State Administration for Religious Affairs, are intended to limit all religious activities to official venues only and prevent the display of religious symbols outdoors.

All religious activity will have to be supervised by the state to make sure churches and places of worship support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Our partners say the Government is working to bring all aspects of religion under the control of the CCP, which is officially atheist.

They say the new measures will severely restrict setting up new state-controlled churches and further regulate the way churches are managed.

They warn the measures 'amount to a complete ban on religious activities' and are an attempt to suffocate the burgeoning unofficial church, which is made up of Christians who have been driven underground to seek freedom of worship.

The Measures on the Administration of Religious Activity Venues demand that all religious activity must uphold the leadership of the CCP, the socialist system, and adhere to China's policy of Sinicization.

The aim of Sinicization is to make China more Chinese in the eyes of the CCP, by removing symbols of religion including Christianity.

In recent years, more than 1,500 crosses have been torn down from authorised churches in Zhejiang province alone. Our partners report that a fresh wave of cross demolitions is set to begin.

Christian leaders demand Jaranwala inquiry

Church and civil rights leaders in Pakistan are demanding an investigation into anti-Christian rioting in Jaranwala amid illegal arrests of local believers and a police claim of a 'foreign conspiracy' to create religious strife, sources said.

Violent mobs incited by hardline Islamist party Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan attacked churches and homes of Christian residents in Jaranwala near Faisalabad after two Christian brothers were accused of blasphemy on August 16. Numerous churches were set on fire, while Christian homes and businesses were ransacked for hours while police were silent spectators.

Punjab Police Inspector-General Usman Anwar said at a press conference that the riots in Jaranwala and desecration of the Koran in Sargodha on August 19-20 were evidence of a conspiracy by officials in India to detract from that country's mistreatment of Christians. His claim was dismissed as 'ludicrous' by Church of Pakistan President Bishop Azad Marshall, who told Morning Star News: *'Instead of investigating the underlying reasons of such attacks and addressing the root cause, ie, misuse of the harsh blasphemy laws, the police are arresting and harassing innocent Christians and trying to cover up the truth behind the violent attacks in Jaranwala by blaming foreign intelligence.'*

(Source: Morning Star News)

Christian community devastated, page 12

Listen to our latest podcasts



FAITHFUL WHERE WE ARE North Korea is a country that fascinates many of us – not least because it seems so secretive. But what is life really like there? What's it like being a Christian in North Korea? In this edition of Release International's *Voice* podcast we continue our conversation with Eric Foley, head of our sister ministry, Voice of the Martyrs Korea. Last month Eric spoke about his ministry – and how it was transformed by listening to, and understanding, North Korean Christians. Listen now as Eric suggests how we are to view and pray for our North Korean brothers and sisters in Christ.

CHRIST IS SUFFICIENT The first of two podcast conversations with Eric Foley of Voice of the Martyrs Korea. In his letter to the Colossians the Apostle Paul emphasises that our sufficiency is in Christ alone, *'for in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and [we] have been filled in him'*. And yet Paul speaks of his sufferings. In this edition of Release International's *Voice* podcast we find out from Eric what ministry to North Korean Christians looks like – and how Voice of the Martyrs Korea began.

CHINA: FEARING THE LORD, NOT MAN *'Released from a small prison to a bigger prison.'* That's how life is described for many Chinese Christian pastors who have been imprisoned for their gospel ministry and who continue to live under heavy surveillance after their release. In this edition of the *Voice* podcast we speak to Release International partner Bob Fu, president of the Christian organisation ChinaAid. Hear Bob describe the current political situation in China, and what that means for Christians and for the Christian church. Bob also shares some of the challenges faced by high-profile pastors – even after they are released from prison.

Sign up to Release



Laos adopting China's tactics

'Laos not only shares a border with China; it shares a communist ideology, and that includes strong restrictions on religion,' said Dr Hyun Sook Foley of Voice of the Martyrs Korea. She points to the July 28 arrest in Laos of Chinese human rights attorney Lu Siwei as he was on his way to the US as a sign of China's influence on the Laos Government. *'We should not be surprised to see Laos adopt China-style religious restrictions to attempt to control its rapidly growing Christian population,'* she said.

'In 1994 there were 400 Christians in Laos, but by 2020 there were over 250,000, and by the end of 2023, Lao Christians believe there will be over 400,000.' She said that sharp increase had led to challenges for the Lao Christian community.

'Persecution and restrictions are the main external challenges. Most persecution of Christians in Laos is done by family members or village authorities who are concerned that Christianity offends the spirits.'

But she said that it was not only the spirits villagers worry about offending. Lao authorities watch the growth of unregistered Christian congregations with concern.

'Similar to China, there is a clear expectation and growing pressure by the Government for all churches to officially register their existence and fully comply with all religious regulations,' she said. Those regulations also govern access to Bibles. *'Bibles are not sold in bookstores in Laos. The registered churches sell Bibles, and some foreign groups have sought legal permission to bring Bibles in for mass distributions.'*

However, according to Dr Foley, buying a Bible from a registered church or receiving a Bible from a government-permitted distribution point can expose church leaders and local believers to pressure from their fellow villagers or from government authorities. *'Public acquisition of a Bible can be like a trail leading suspicious villagers or government authorities right to the door of an unregistered pastor or believer.'*

(Source: VOM Korea)

Kidnappings follow killing of Nigerian pastor

Two Christians were kidnapped in Kaduna state, Nigeria, at the end of August two days after gunmen described as terrorists killed a Baptist pastor in another area of the state, sources said.

Terrorists invaded the predominantly Christian community of Wusasa, Zaria, and kidnapped the two Christians, named as brothers Yusha'u Peter and Joshua Peter, staff members at St Luke's Anglican Hospital in Wusasa, Isiyaku Ibrahim, a community leader in the area, said.

'This is coming not long after the father of the two victims was also kidnapped and taken into captivity by the terrorists,' Ibrahim told Morning Star News in a text message. *'The terrorists have so often made our area their target of attacks and abductions of our people. In fact, recently two Christians in our community were killed in similar attacks.'*

The two brothers had fled to Zaria from Ikara in Kaduna state after their father was kidnapped there, according to local reports.

The abductions came after Rev Jeremiah Mayau, the 61-year-old pastor of Tawaliu Baptist Church in Ungwan Mission, Kujama in Chikun County, was shot dead on August 23.

(Source: Morning Star News)

Fellowship vital for survival in Eritrea

In Eritrea alone, the persecution of evangelical Christians in the past two years is worse than it's ever been, according to our partner, Dr Berhane Asmelash of Release Eritrea.

Since the Asmara Government ordered all evangelical and Pentecostal churches to be closed in 2002, thousands of Christians who belong to this group have been victims of arbitrary arrest, torture and disappearances.

The persecution is not confined to the non-recognised religious groups such as evangelicals and Pentecostals but several members of the legally recognised groups have also been victims of arrest and restrictions, such as the Orthodox, Catholics, Lutherans and Muslims.

Currently there are around 400 evangelical prisoners – 25 per cent of whom are deemed long-term (sentences of four years or more). These include Pastor Kiflu Gebremeskel and Rev Haile Naizgi from Full Gospel Church, who were arrested in 2004. They have not been charged, nor has Milion Gebreselassie, a nurse and anaesthetist, who has been in prison for more than nine years.

Three Orthodox clergy members, Dr Fitsum Gebrenigus, Dr Tekleab Mengisteab and Rev Gebremedhn, were arrested in November 2004 and remain in prison without trial.

Since March 2023, 130 have been imprisoned, while 28 long-term prisoners have been released, including 13 who had been locked away for around ten years.

'We don't know why they are releasing them now but the main reason for arresting or detaining them long term is because they want to break their spirit,' Dr Asmelash said.

'Once they think that prisoners are deteriorating emotionally – when

*Dr Berhane Asmelash
says the main reason
Christians are arrested
or detained long-term
in Eritrea is to break
their spirit*

Supporting imprisoned believers in their darkest hour

From China and North Korea to Eritrea and Pakistan untold numbers of Christians across the world today are suffering behind bars. Some have been detained for many years but, helped by Release International partners, continue to follow their Saviour, writes Tom Hardie

It may be difficult to determine the exact number of Christians behind bars but wherever they are – whether it's an Eritrean prison, a North Korean labour camp or a Pakistani jail cell – they need our prayers.

Some have been locked away for more than a decade, separated from family and loved ones and suffering brutal conditions.

they've broken them – then they release them.'

Which is the main reason why some are still detained even after many years. They remain strong in their faith. If they are well-educated then the authorities fear how they can influence others when they get out.

'The Government is anti-education so anyone with a degree is a potential target. All of those in government have only elementary school education.'

For prisoners who are released because they have suffered breakdowns life outside can be equally difficult. *'In prison they were active but when released they become paranoid. A lot of the pastors won't leave their homes, especially if they signed a document renouncing their faith. They are ashamed and don't want to see other Christians. They regret it but there is no one to comfort them.'*

Dr Asmelash said: *'We offered one pastor I met, who had been in prison 16 years, help to start a new life but his brain had frozen. He comes to church, listens but doesn't talk to anyone.'*

'What we have learned from former prisoners is that fellowship is vital. They form a community in prison, pledging to one another not to compromise or renounce their faith, being prepared to die for it.'

'They understand what it means to be "crucified with Christ", so they are strong whether in prison or outside. If you can stay with your group, then you can survive in prison.'

Prisoners are not allowed to read, even the official government newspaper, because the authorities want their brains to remain inactive.

'They want them to forget even the alphabet so no reading material, including Bibles, is allowed,' said Dr Asmelash. On top of that the food is mostly inedible so prisoners frequently lose weight and become unwell.

On top of these inhumane practices, visits from family are forbidden so it can be many years before they see each other again.

LIFE OUTSIDE

Sadly, even once they are freed a new set of challenges arises, including trying to find accommodation, because landlords will not rent to anyone who has been in jail.

Most would go to live with their extended families but former prisoners, especially women, are often abandoned by those closest to them. Previously their families wanted them to study, marry and have children but after 14-15 years in prison they could be aged in their early 40s and seen as unable to contribute. Their only option may be to stay with friends, having to move on every few days to avoid questions from suspicious landlords.

Release Eritrea helps pay for accommodation and healthcare; prisoners can leave detention with serious medical issues. One woman who was released weighed only 34kg, while another, a Christian singer who was denied release in order to have treatment for cancer, was set free only when the authorities were certain he would die.

As well as supporting hundreds of former prisoners, the ministry has helped about 2,000 Christians displaced by the Tigray conflict who need food, housing and healthcare.

It also assists Christians who have escaped the country to retrain in their new homeland. *'In the past three years we have trained 815 people to start their own businesses, for example, in cooking, tailoring or photography,'* said Dr Asmelash.

PRAY FOR ERITREAN PRISONERS

- **To stay strong physically, emotionally and spiritually. Some prisoners are now in their 70s**
- **Pray that they will have other believers around them for mutual support and encouragement**
- **Ask God to restore to Himself all those who have succumbed to renouncing their faith, so that they can know His acceptance and feel strong enough to rejoin their communities**

A story of redemption

✠ My name is 'Mebrhit'* and I accepted Jesus as my Saviour in 2001, but due to persecution from my family my sister and I stopped attending any Christian gathering. However, in August 2003 I rededicated my life to Christ, and then, while waiting for admission to nursing school in 2008, I was arrested at a Bible study group. Initially I was taken to the police station and after one week transferred to Adi Abeyto prison in Asmara, the capital. The next day, because we refused to renounce our faith, I and other girls were transferred to another, notorious prison, where



I joined Twen (see January's *Voice* magazine for Twen's story) and other women.

There I could not tolerate the hardship. Once I was taken to

be beaten but was spared when I passed out.

Then we were transferred to Me'etr prison in northern Eritrea where I continued to suffer from negative thoughts and sleeplessness. I was not eating and lost weight. Nevertheless, I was getting good care from Twen and the others who were feeding me and praying for me.

However, after five years I began to question why I was still there and signed in order to get released.

After I went home my depression continued for more than a year but during all these times Christians were praying for me, and Twen even had someone on the outside come to visit me and invite me to a home worship group. There I started to pray and ask for forgiveness and while praying a song came into my heart and I started to sing it. For the first time the heaviness lifted and I experienced God's love once again.

I currently minister to refugees outside Eritrea. I am involved in street ministry and have seen many girls come to know the Lord. I preach and teach and care pastorally for those who are struggling in life.

Although painful my faith journey has helped me to understand those who struggle in life. I am grateful for the Lord has given me precious sisters and brothers who tirelessly prayed and cared for me. 🙏

**Name changed to protect identity*

'Just knowing he's alive is enough'

August 13 marked the sixth anniversary of the forced disappearance of Christian human rights lawyer **Gao Zhisheng** (pictured).

Gao is a renowned human rights lawyer, who defended underground house church Christians. For nearly six years, his whereabouts have been unknown.

From 2006 authorities constantly detained and tortured him but according to Geng He, his wife, the persecution intensified in 2007. *'Gao Zhisheng published an open letter to the US Congress, in which [he] pointed out that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was a criminal gang in the guise of a state,'* she testified to a US Sub-committee this year. *'From that day on, Gao Zhisheng was never free again until August 2017, when he was illegally kidnapped by the CCP.'*

She asked the US embassy in China to visit her husband and confirm his condition. However, she recognised her requests might not be possible and added: *'It's okay to have [Gao] give me a call and tell me he's still alive. Just knowing he's alive is enough.'*

Two pastors and one co-worker of **Linfen Covenant House Church**

were arrested for so-called 'fraud'. The CCP are accusing church

'Prison is where I meet with God'

workers of fraud in order to criminalise tithing and offerings. Recently, attorneys visited the three prisoners, Pastor Li Jie, Pastor Han Xiaodong and co-worker Wang Qiang, who all face this charge.

However, during the visit Pastor Han reflected on his circumstances. *'Persecution is a blessing,'* he said. *'One day, we will all understand that all of these are meaningful.'*

'Please trust I'm free,' Li told his wife. *'The prison is where I meet with God and experience His Grace!'*

Linfen church was persecuted for refusing to join China's official Three-Self Patriotic Movement church. During an outdoor family camp in August 2022, police raided the event and arrested members of the congregation, including Li, Han and Wang.

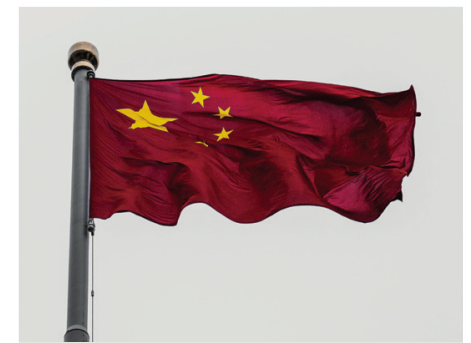
Similarly, 12 leaders of **Linfen Golden Lampstand Church** were also arrested for fraud. In July Golden Lampstand reported that two of them, husband-and-wife

pastors Wang Xiaoguang and Yang Rongli, miss each other greatly. They are older and relatively weak physically. The families involved in this case are understood to be facing significant pressure to confess to fraud.

As of September 2023, there had been no update concerning Wang Yi, the pastor of **Early Rain Covenant Church**, except for a visit from his wife, Jiang Rong, in October 2021. At that time, Wang was healthy and allowed to read in his room.

Wang, who was vocal about how the church should be separate from the CCP, was arrested in 2018 for 'inciting subversion of state power' and 'illegal business operations'. During his sermons, he regularly called upon China's premier, Xi Jinping, to repent.

The outside world knows little about his situation in prison, while Early Rain leaders continue to face relentless persecution, such as interrogations, surveillance and detentions. However, they remain resolute in their faith.



PRAY FOR CHINESE PRISONERS

- That the whereabouts of Christian lawyers such as Gao Zhisheng would be known
- Those in prison would be strong in the Lord, know His presence and reach many with the gospel
- Those persecuting the church would come to repentance and faith

NORTH KOREA

Deacon Jang was kidnapped from China and is in a North Korean prison

15-year sentence for kidnapped believer

Zhang Wen Shi, also known by his Korean name and title as Deacon Jang, is an ethnically Korean-Chinese citizen who lived in Changbai, China, a town on the border with North Korea. He worked alongside Korean-Chinese pastor Han Chung-Ryeol, ministering to Koreans who crossed over to Changbai.

Though it is illegal to cross into China without permission, North Koreans often visit border towns to purchase goods for reselling back home, to seek medicine or other help and to conduct business. Near Changbai, they gather herbs on the Korean side of the mountain and sell them at the market in Changbai.

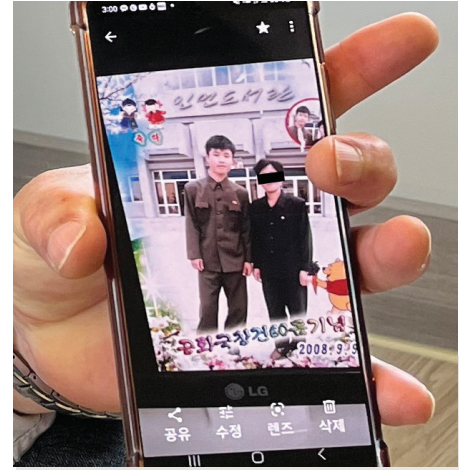
Jang regularly hosted these visiting North Koreans before they

travelled home, giving them warm clothing, food and supplies for their return. He saw it as his Christian duty to welcome the stranger and, as a believer, shared about his faith to those willing to listen.

A number of these Koreans became Christians. Some returned to Jang's home repeatedly for more Bible training, and he and Pastor Han taught them how to share their faith with their loved ones. Their goal was always to see North Koreans return home.

In November 2014 Jang was kidnapped from China and sentenced to 15 years in a North Korean prison.

Fifteen months later, Pastor Han was lured from his home and stabbed to death in Changbai.



This is the last photo of Kyung Jae Kim before his arrest and disappearance in September 2008. One day before the 19-year-old planned to escape from North Korea, security forces raided his home and arrested him. The raid was part of an operation to gather Christians who had been carrying the gospel secretly into North Korea for many years. Kim's parents received reports indicating that their son had been sent to a prison camp. His father has petitioned ceaselessly for his release but without success. It is estimated that at least 30,000 Christians are imprisoned in North Korea, suffering inhumane conditions. Please remember them in your prayers.

TAKE ACTION

We urge you to write to the North Korean Ambassador to the UK on Jang's behalf and respectfully ask for his release, using his Chinese name, Zhang Wen Shi. We advise that you keep the letter brief, do not mention Release International or express any political views and limit the request to the following: We request the return of Zhang Wen Shi to China.

Address for Mailing:

**Ambassador,
Embassy of the Democratic
People's Republic of Korea,
73 Gunnersbury Ave,
London W5 4LP**



Helping the falsely accused in Pakistan

Our partners currently support and look after the following Christians and their families:

Pervaiz Masih, who spent five years in prison under a false accusation of blasphemy before being released with no proof against him. Since his acquittal our partners have looked after him and his family by providing pastoral support, helping them to rent a home in a safer location, providing medical treatment for his wife and help with starting his own business.

Zafar Bhatti (pictured), who is under a death sentence in Adyala Jail, Rawalpindi. Our partner regularly visits him to pray and encourage him and has done so recently as he was depressed. He is diabetic and his health is deteriorating. Our partner is supporting his wife, Nawab Bibi (pictured), whose health is also poor. Because of this, and the cost of travel, she can visit him only once a month.

Asif Pervaiz, who is in jail under a death sentence. His wife, Marilyn Asif, is supported by our partner. Sadly their children, who miss their father deeply, are refusing to attend school.

Also sentenced to death is **Ishfaq Masih**. His wife, Nabeela, visits him in prison 100 miles away once a month.

PRAY

- Pray for better health for Zafar Bhatti and his wife and that his sentence will be overturned
- Pray for the acquittal of Asif Pervaiz and for his wife Marilyn and the children as they are suffering while he is in prison
- Pray that Ishfaq Masih can cope with the heat and humidity in the prison and that he, Nabeela and their young daughter will remain firm in their faith
- Pray for our partners' security. Being associated with accused Christians carries severe risks

WHAT YOUR SUPPORT MEANS

Thanks to your financial help Release International supports a number of projects to help Christians imprisoned for their faith. These include:

ERITREA Support of food packages for prisoners, financial assistance for prisoners' families, accommodation and healthcare for ex-prisoners. Providing those who have fled Eritrea and the Tigray conflict with skills to help them earn a living

CHINA Support of workers to ensure that imprisoned believers are not forgotten and receive legal assistance and that the wider Christian community is able to pray for them and speak out on their behalf. Direct support to prisoners' families

PAKISTAN Regular pastoral visits to prisoners and their families and tailored support for these families including financial help and assistance with individual situations such as relocating to a safer area



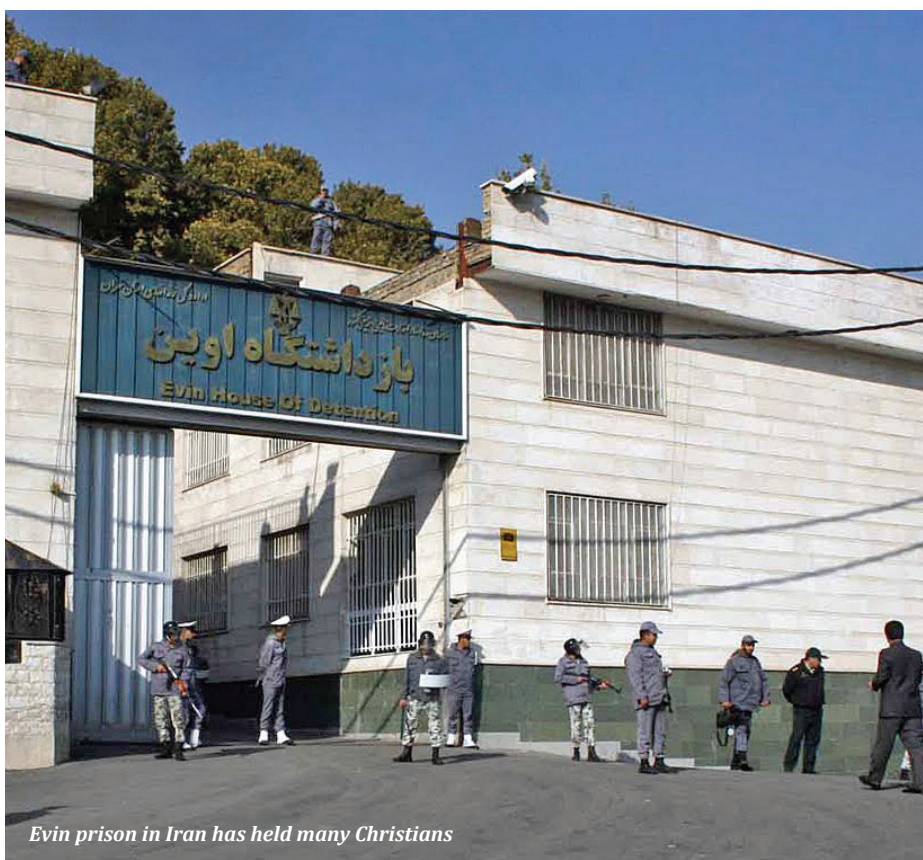
Nabeela

IRAN Support of ex-prisoners re-establishing their lives and ministry in new countries. Once someone has been arrested in Iran it is difficult for them to be an effective part of the cell church community because they will be monitored

LAOS Support with basic living expenses and medical needs of the former prisoner, Bounchan, following his release from prison in 2012 after 14 years' detention

GLOBAL PRISONERS

We have provided support to families of prisoners and to released prisoners from a variety of places, including Bhutan, Somalia and North Africa, as they recover from their experience



Evin prison in Iran has held many Christians



PLEASE HELP CHRISTIAN PRISONERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Release International helps Christian prisoners of faith and their families around the world in the name of Jesus.

To support this vital ministry to courageous believers, we depend on the gifts and prayers of Christians in the UK and Ireland.

Your gift could:

- Provide practical help and pastoral care for prisoners and their families
- Enable families to visit their loved ones in prison
- Provide legal and other assistance

To make a gift please use the enclosed form, call 01689 823491 or give online at releaseinternational.org



Christian community devastated by mob violence

Ruthless attacks in Jaranwala, Pakistan, in August left churches gutted and Christian homes burnt down, writes Laura Hayes

Christians in the Pakistan city of Jaranwala are still coming to terms with a series of devastating attacks on homes and churches in August. News of the riots quickly spread around the world.

According to Morning Star News (MSN), the rioting began after Muslim residents of Cinema Chowk in Jaranwala, Faisalabad District, accused Umar Saleem, known as Rocky, of desecrating pages of the Koran and writing blasphemous comments.

A relative said Rocky was leaving for work when he saw a piece of paper with something written in red ink pasted on the door of a Muslim neighbour.

'When he went closer to read it, he was shocked to see a photograph of him and his younger brother Umair, alias Raja, pasted on top of the page,' the relative told MSN. 'Beneath the page were some partially burnt pages of the Koran inscribed with derogatory remarks about Islam and Mohammed.'

The source said Rocky, father of a three-month-old son, panicked and removed the pages from the door. As if on cue, two Muslims pounced on him and snatched the pages, accusing him of blasphemy.

'The allegation is ridiculous – who would name himself and his brother as the writers of the note and also put their photo on it?' the relative said. 'Someone has framed them to exact revenge.'

Rocky, aged 24, works as a cleaner at a textile factory, while Raja, 21, works at a local government school. They are both members of a Full Gospel Assemblies Church.

A case was registered against the two Christians under Sections



Christians protest after the attack on Jaranwala

295-B and 295-C of the blasphemy statutes. Section 295-B relates to desecration of the Koran and carries a punishment of life in prison. Section 295-C relates to insulting Mohammed and is punishable by death.

Thousands of Muslims, led by local leaders of Islamist extremist parties *Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan* and the *Khatam-e-Nabuwat Movement*, launched attacks on churches and homes of Christians in the area.

'Over 20 churches, more than 200 homes and shops, and several vehicles were burnt and destroyed by the mobs,' area evangelist Imran Bhatti said.

Bhatti was one of the few Christians who stayed behind while hundreds of others fled their homes as soon

as they heard announcements from mosques calling on Muslims to protest against the alleged blasphemy.

More than 5,000 Christians live in Jaranwala, most of them sanitary workers on meagre wages who occupy cramped homes.

'The mobs not only burned and looted our churches and homes, they also vandalised our graveyard and the office of the assistant commissioner, who is also a Christian,' Bhatti told MSN.

Kamran Bashir, a 55-year-old Christian, was one of those forced to flee.

'They broke the windows, doors and took out fridges, sofas, chairs and other household items to pile them up in front of the church to be burned,' he said. *'They also burned and desecrated Bibles; they were ruthless.'*

Videos on social media show protesters destroying Christian possessions while police appear to look on.

A mother identified only as Nasreen fled with her four children. *'We just left without dressing,'* she told MSN. *'We picked up our children and just ran.'*

Nasreen and her family were among several people who spent the hot and humid night in fields. She added that there were also girls and women who lay flat on the roofs of their homes in scorching heat to hide from vandals setting fire to their belongings in the street.

According to Human Rights Focus Pakistan (HRFP) 19 churches were completely gutted by the attacks and destroyed. Two further churches were damaged along with community halls and prayer rooms. More than 400 houses were affected.

The report stated that more than 10,000 Christians had hid in sugar cane and other fields during the first nights of attack.

Release International partners Lahore Evangelical Ministries (LEM) were among the first to visit the area. Rev Waseem Khokhar of LEM said



Homes and churches were destroyed in the attack Photo: Aid to the Church in Need/ Rev Iftikhar Indryas

there had been an announcement over mosque loudspeakers in the Jaranwala district of Faisalabad early on August 16 that torn pages of the Muslim holy book were lying in the street of the Christian town.

'So, all Muslims were encouraged to gather and attack the Christian town of 350 houses, and to protest against the insult.'

'A mob of around a thousand people got together and attacked the town. Very sadly, within a couple of hours five main churches and 40 Christian houses were burnt down.'

'Praise God that there were no injuries or deaths of any Christians because, after the announcement, they managed to flee from their town and left everything behind to save their lives. They hid themselves at different places in the fields nearby.'

BBC Urdu reported: *'Amir Mir, the information minister for Punjab province, condemned the alleged blasphemy and said in a statement that thousands of police had been sent to the area, with dozens of people detained.'*

Church of Pakistan bishop Azad Marshall said the Christian community was 'deeply pained and distressed' by the events.

'We cry out for justice and action from law enforcement and those who dispense justice, to intervene immediately and assure us that our lives are valuable in our own homeland,' he posted on X (formerly Twitter).

Pastor Chandrapala was greeted by an angry mob when he returned home



Darkening clouds in paradise

Mob violence against pastors, often instigated by Buddhist monks, is on the rise as the gospel reaches more communities in Sri Lanka

Returning home early one evening Pastor Chandrapala was faced with an angry 50-strong mob surrounding his property. Despite his obvious fears, he kept calm and was able to record the harassment on his phone. The group included a number of Buddhist monks who, after spotting his presence, tried to goad him into responding in order to raise a complaint against him.

However, he kept silent. Bizarrely they even warned him that although he could hold a church service, he could not invite anyone else to attend!

Thankfully the emergency response team at the local police station was led by a Christian officer who upon being made aware of the incident took immediate action.

Pastor Chandrapala lives in an

area populated by Hindus as well as Buddhists. While the church distributed packs of literature to Hindu children there was no reaction from the local community; however, once Buddhist youngsters started receiving them the uproar began.

At the insistence of local monks, who exert great influence in the community, the pastor was called to an inquiry earlier this year, and incorrectly accused of holding prohibited meetings on the ground that they were not taking place in a registered church. The law actually permits such gatherings but he was warned to stop his activities.

When the pastor was challenged that the books he was distributing were attempts to convert others, his response was that he was not trying to convert but simply to bless the local community.

However, despite his actions being lawful, a mob was rounded up to intimidate him as he returned home.

This was not the first time he had faced threats.

In 2019 the entire village community had surrounded his home when he had two other pastors visiting. Police, who blocked the roads, and monks were among the crowd trying to intimidate the Christians.

Chandrapala had built his church with the support of other congregations and that seems to have been the issue. The church has a congregation of about 15 but none are from the local village area.

His children are at school and feel the resentment against them, but they believe that they have God's protection. His daughter, who is supported by our partners, goes to a Christian school.

Our partner also provides legal help to Pastor Chandrapala.

This persecution is part of an increasing Buddhist nationalism not just in society but at state level. Currently, a government minister is working to introduce more formal registration procedures for all churches including meetings in

individual houses.

At the same time Hindu fundamentalism, influenced by the Indian experience, is rising in the north and east of the country where the population is predominantly Tamil.

CHURCH GROWS 500 PER CENT

In March last year, Buddhist villagers organised a 1,000-strong mob attack on Pastor Indrajith's church after a number of local families came to faith in Christ.

These attacks were instigated by ten temples. Believers were threatened and told to stop services, some were beaten, and one was hospitalised with a split mouth. When the pastor visited his church members, he was often stopped by crowds, monks and the police. He has had death threats, even whilst in a police station.

On Easter Sunday he was challenged by the police who had come armed with guns and was told to stop the service. Officers then took him and about 100 of his congregation to the police station where the pastor demanded to know his rights.

Our partner has become involved in supporting the church, which has been opposed by politicians and local officials. The outcomes so far are

encouraging. The judge hearing the cases has ruled that the opposition was wrong and that Indrajith did have the right to hold worship services.

He filed a human rights petition against the politicians, and they immediately stopped their hostile actions. On top of that all the protests of the monks were shown to be illegal.

One of the pastor's opponents, who was a drug dealer and led the attack, eventually found Christ. When he died soon after, Indrajith conducted his funeral. One of the monks who led the attack has even since become his friend and some of the other monks who instigated the attack, former childhood friends, have since spoken in his defence.

Most encouragingly of all, since the incident his congregation has grown by 500 per cent! But it has come at a cost. His children have had to move to a Christian school after being beaten.

He is now affiliated to our partner and is determined to stay and continue his work. Members of a local parliament have even visited the church for a blessing.

Indrajith's ambition is to establish more disciples and churches during the next 20 years. He wants to see a church within walking distance for everyone and is pleased that our

Continued on p16



*Pastor Hasitha Nuwan
oversees seven churches*



Pastor Suganthraj's family shop was set alight

partner is doing resilience training with his congregation. Members are more confident and less fearful as they are aware of their rights.

LOVE FOR A BOMBER

Pastor Hasitha Nuwan, who oversees seven churches in a Buddhist area and whose vision is to reach all 520 unchurched villages in a 30km radius, was recently harassed by monks who tried to provoke him into an angry response.

A DIVERSE NATION

Sri Lanka is both religiously and ethnically diverse

- Buddhists account for about 70 per cent of the population, followed by Hindus at 12.6 per cent, Muslims (mostly Sunni) at 9.7 per cent, Roman Catholics at 6.1 per cent and Protestant Christians at 1.3 per cent
- Most Sri Lankans are Sinhalese, a majority of whom are Buddhist
- The second largest ethnic group, Sri Lankan Tamils, are mostly Hindu with a significant Christian minority
- Muslims are recognised as a separate ethnoreligious group
- Indian Tamils and a small number of other ethnicities round out the population

He values prayer for all the issues relating to persecution, but especially for grace not to retaliate, and for deliverance from his enemies. He struggles particularly when young people are targeted by his opponents. One recently needed stitches to a wound.

Pastor Suganthraj, who comes from a Hindu family, has faced ongoing persecution.

After his father-in-law was dragged into a Buddhist temple and beaten up, his house was pelted with stones and motor bikes were revved up outside his home. When he is away, thugs open the gates into the family's land and let animals in to eat their vegetables.

In March their small shop was set alight with the loss of their motorcycle.

'The pastor would ask us to pray that his ministry will grow, that the family's financial needs will be met and that they will be able to live in peace not in fear,' our partner said.

Another pastor had a narrow escape when a small bomb that was about to be thrown at him blew up in the hand of his attacker, who required 52 stitches. Despite the attack the pastor went to visit him and told him that Jesus loved him!

CHANGING TRENDS

There is evidence of recent changing trends, said our partners, as discrimination increases against Christians in Sri Lanka. In 2020 there was mostly local state-led opposition to Christian activity but, by 2022, specific individuals or groups not acting on behalf of the state were blamed for these attacks.

One of the factors in the hostility is the fact that Sinhalese Buddhism exists only in Sri Lanka so when it is threatened its adherents spring to its defence sometimes violently.

Although there is currently no legal requirement to register churches and no official procedures, the situation is likely to change for the worse, says our partner. There may be the introduction of anti-conversion legislation arising from the view that conversions to Christianity are causing 'disharmony'.

While Roman Catholic and Assemblies of God churches are recognised as traditional (at least in principle), evangelical churches are not. Recently there has been renewed hostility against evangelicals because they have been branded as 'born again' – term that has been deliberately used to imply Christian 'extremism'.

To counter the threats, our partners run workshops on the law and religious freedom and have established a network of 150 lawyers across the country to defend churches and pastors when needed.

(Source: Release International partners)

EASTER BOMBINGS

Justice still evades victims of the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019 that left 260 dead despite sustained public outcry led by the country's powerful Catholic church, a presidential commission of inquiry and prosecution of senior government and law enforcement officials including the then President of the republic.



RELIGIOUS EXTREMISTS UNITE AGAINST THE 'BORN-AGAIN CULT'

It is almost four years since Release International has been able to visit Sri Lanka. The effects of Covid 19 and the economic problems have taken their toll and the country has suffered. The population continues to have serious problems, one of which is that the important tourist trade has not picked up, even though the rate of inflation has now reduced from 95 per cent to 25 per cent. Consequently, many churches, their members and pastors have endured great financial hardship.

Against this background there is a clear and worrying trend that persecution of evangelical churches is on the increase. Local temples, both Buddhist and Hindu, are opposing pastors and there is now even evidence of Buddhist and Hindu extremists working collaboratively against the church, labelling evangelicals as the 'born-again cult'.

Opposition and attacks are often against very isolated pastors with harassment and physical hostility being backed up by what are currently false allegations that churches must register before they can meet.

Encouragingly our partner has recruited and trained 150 lawyers who are now willing to provide legal representation for struggling churches and pastors.

We have witnessed very courageous pastors determined to share the love and gospel of Christ in the face of daunting hostility often under attack and greatly outnumbered by large hostile crowds.

We praise God for the vision, the faithfulness, the courage, and the compassion for their neighbours and enemies found in the hearts of many pastors. The gospel is spreading, and the church is growing.

They and our partner need our prayers and support to help them to sustain their love, commitment and courage.

The words of one pastor we met are unforgettable: *'This is the least reached area; I want to make it the most reached area!'*

'Linda' (volunteer)

ENTRENCHED ISSUES

There has been an increase in anti-minority rhetoric and staunch Buddhist nationalism. The ethno-religious violence against minority faith groups, particularly the Christian community, is both an entrenched and chronic issue that has persisted in Sri Lankan society irrespective of the changes to the country's socio-political and economic context. In the past 24 months there have been:

- 160-plus recorded incidents of FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief) violations perpetrated against the Christian community
- The State is the main driver of FoRB violations against Christians (over 60 per cent of the incidents since 2021)
- There has been an increase in the intensity and frequency of Hindu extremist group-led incidents of persecution against the Christian community
- The main points of contention in social hostilities and state restrictions against Christians are propagation, conversion and registration
- Negative judicial sentiment concerning FoRB in general and religious freedoms of Christians in particular

HOW YOUR SUPPORT HELPS

Thanks to your support we are able to provide:

- Tailored help to the children of rural pastors, especially those affected by the economic collapse, who are facing pressure from their communities
- Lawyer assistance to Christians who face legal pressures
- Support for Christian teachers who provide education to children forced out of state schools because of their faith

Take the plunge: fill your cafetière with conviction coffee!

Individuals and churches can support persecuted Christians simply by using Release International's own great-tasting brand

Calling all coffee lovers! It's the most popular drink in the world and according to the British Coffee Association more than two billion cups are consumed every day; 98 million of those are in the UK. A sophisticated 'coffee culture' has grown up around this popularity. How is your coffee roasted? Where does it come from? Do you grind your own beans? How long should it stand in the cafetière before you plunge? And beyond the questions of taste and brewing etiquette the brand of coffee we drink can also say something important about our wider values. Coffee companies often align themselves with particular causes and promote those concerns through their marketing and financial investment.

At Release International we love good coffee and we also have a message to share. Back in 2019, with the help of two gifted supporters, this led us to

develop our own great-tasting Hazaq Coffee. Hazaq is the Hebrew word for 'strong, firm or courageous'.

Christians face hatred and persecution in more than half of the top 10 coffee-producing countries in the world and we want this association to lead to positive action. Through our coffee we want to tell the stories of those who suffer and provoke a response of prayer with every cup that is drunk.

We want to give churches and individual Christians the opportunity to buy their coffee in accordance with their convictions, knowing that all profits support the ministry of Release International. We want to give our coffee-loving supporters the opportunity to stand strong with persecuted Christians.

So, if you're not already a regular customer, we'd love you to try Hazaq Coffee the next time you need to



restock. And what about your church? Would you consider serving Hazaq Coffee on Sunday mornings or in your church café during the week?

'It's such a simple yet enjoyable way to help our persecuted family,' says Paul Robinson, Release International CEO. 'Every time you drink a Hazaq coffee, you know you are helping another Christian.'

All our coffee is available to buy online at www.hazaqcoffee.com and is delivered promptly direct to your doorstep. Currently we stock three distinct and delicious varieties which are available as whole beans or in a range of grinds to suit your requirements. Our standard bags are 250g (we are also able to supply in bulk 2kg bags on request) and when you join our 3-bags-a-month Coffee Club you'll get a 10% discount on your order! Coffee anyone?

We believe in ethically sourced, freshly roasted, great-tasting coffee direct to your doorstep. We also believe in standing strong for persecuted Christians.



BY RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

Delivering a message to strengthen your faith

Our team of speakers present inspirational talks that combine biblical truth with the lived-out experience of persecuted Christians. Why not invite them to speak at your church today?

Release International raises the voice of persecuted Christians in many different ways: through our quarterly magazine, social media channels, our podcast and at exhibitions and special events. One other essential way in which we communicate the voice of our persecuted family is by personally visiting local churches across the country.

In his second and third New Testament letters the Apostle John wrote about his desire not just to write but also to meet with believers face to face (2 John 12, 3 John 13-14). We believe this is an essential element of Christian ministry that deepens communication and recognises the value of fellowship.

Release International has a dedicated team of regional Engagement Managers supported by several trained Volunteer Speakers based across the UK. Over the course of a year we visit hundreds of churches and Christian groups in our regions to share current news and testimony from our partners on the ground, and to bring a biblical perspective to the wider subject of persecution. We have found that when we present the perspective of biblical truth together with the contemporary experiences of our persecuted brothers and sisters, many of our preconceived ideas as 21st century western Christians are powerfully challenged. When we learn lessons of discipleship with persecuted Christians our perspective is changed and our walk with Christ strengthened.

We would love to have the opportunity to visit your church



Release International has a dedicated team of trained speakers

or group. Our team of speakers are flexible and able to respond to your particular circumstances. For example, we can preach during a Sunday service, share at a mid-week prayer meeting or speak at a special mission-focused event. We can visit in person or share at an online meeting. We always aim to communicate in a dynamic and engaging way – teaching clearly, sharing compelling testimonies, using images and video when relevant and presenting a challenge to respond. We also bring a selection of books and other helpful resources with us and are pleased to speak to people after the meeting.

If you would like a Release International speaker to visit your church please do get in touch with your regional Engagement Manager (see opposite) who would be delighted to arrange a suitable date or email us at info@releaseinternational.org.

What churches are saying about our speakers

'I had really good feedback from our church members about Release International's visit. I'm glad our church had the opportunity to increase our awareness of persecuted Christians. We are so sheltered it's good to have our boundaries extended. It was an inspiring visit.'

Alan Welsh, Pastor of Cornerstone Christian Fellowship, Cumbernauld

'Thank you for sharing the reality of being a Christian in a country where Christianity is not accepted. Your message was very powerful and a wake-up call to the comfortable lives we live here.'

Marty Wingrave, Leader at Mowbray Community Church, Harrogate



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



Volunteers in Swansea who held a fundraising event in the summer

City event raises £3,000

A local team of volunteers in Swansea who host a monthly prayer meeting for persecuted Christians in the city raised more than £3,000 to support Release International projects in Nigeria!

More than 120 people attended their fundraising event held at City Church in July, which included worship music by an African choir and updates on the current state of persecution in Nigeria followed by a delicious finger buffet.

Paul, Release International Engagement Manager for Wales and the West, spoke of his own time in Nigeria meeting Christians whose villages had been attacked and who themselves carried physical and emotional wounds.

As well as the £3,000 raised on the day many pledges were made to support the ministry of Release International across the world.

One of the elders from the church, himself from Nigeria, told us afterwards: *'You may not understand the impact for now, but I am confident the fundraiser will be the start of something special for persecuted Christians all over the world.'*

A huge thank you to our wonderful volunteer team in Swansea!

● **Concerted effort: a performance by the Hope Hill Gospel group at Vine Baptist Church in Sevenoaks, Kent, raised around £1,300!**
A special thanks to the group, organiser David Robertson and to Vine church for hosting.

'SUCH AN AMAZING PRODUCTION'

Check out our website for the latest performances of Artless Theatre Company's inspiring production, *If Prison Walls Could Speak*. The play tells the story of Release International partner Petr Jasek's imprisonment in Sudan. Petr's book, *Imprisoned with ISIS*, is available from our website estore. The play drew packed audiences when it was performed at this year's New Wine celebration in July. Comments from those attending included: 'Moving', 'Excellent', 'Not just a performance', 'Such an amazing production. It drew you right in and you felt like you were part of it'.



Day of the Christian Martyr speakers
Eric Foley, Bob Fu and Mark Mukan

Day of the Christian Martyr

Our 'Out of these Ashes' campaign earlier this year to highlight the persecution of Christians in Nigeria concluded on Release International's annual Day of the Christian Martyr (June 29) with a powerful and moving evening service in Eastbourne. Speakers included Mark Mukan, one of our partners from Nigeria who heads up mission in the Anglican diocese of Jos; Bob Fu, the founder and president of ChinaAid, and Eric Foley, the co-founder and CEO of our associate ministry, Voice of the Martyrs Korea.



IDOP ONLINE 2023

International Day of Prayer
Sunday 5 November | 7:30-8.30pm

CSW everyone
free to believe

evangelical alliance
together making Jesus known



OpenDoors

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians

Ex-prisoner in special day of intercession

November sees the annual and long-established International Day of Prayer for the persecuted church (IDOP)

God gave me life; to give Him my life is a small thing.' That was the remarkable testimony of Twen Theodros, who spent 16 years imprisoned in barbaric conditions in Eritrea for her faith in Christ.

Having been arrested at a prayer vigil on New Year's Eve in 2004 at the age of just 21, Twen endured nearly three years locked away in a shipping container – suffering unbearable heat in the daytime and freezing temperatures at night. Among her fellow detainees was the gospel singer Helen Berhane, who became a close friend.

At the beginning of this year we were finally able to tell Twen's inspiring story – a testimony to God's grace and your prayers – in *Voice* magazine. Now she will be sharing something of her harrowing – but victorious – experience as part of this year's International Day of Prayer for the persecuted church (IDOP).

As we have done the past few years, we will again be joining with the

Evangelical Alliance, Open Doors and CSW to present a special online event to mark this year's IDOP. This will take place on Sunday, November 5 at 7.30 pm.

We recently spoke to Twen again and filmed her for IDOP. Dr Berhane Asmelash, our partner for Eritrea, will also feature in the IDOP film, while Release International CEO Paul Robinson will be appearing in the online event.

'While we would want Christians and churches to be praying for their persecuted brothers and sisters throughout the year, this annual date in the calendar is a great way of reminding one another of issues of persecution and of introducing Christian friends to the realities of persecution for Christ in our world today,' said Paul. 'Please do join us on November 5.'

First launched in 1996 by the World Evangelical Alliance, IDOP is now a well-established date in the Christian calendar. For countless Christians

and churches around the world it is an annual reminder of the vital need to be praying regularly for those who suffer for Christ and the gospel today.

As well as registering to watch the online event, you can encourage your church to mark IDOP this year. Maybe you could organise an IDOP service, or devote part of a Sunday service in November to speak about Release International's ministry and to lead your congregation in prayer? Each year we provide fresh resources that you can download from our website to help you with this. More information will be at releaseinternational.org/ IDOP.

You can register to join the online event on the Evangelical Alliance website (eauk.org).

Twen Theodros
will be sharing
her story for
IDOP



How we react in tough situations may have eternal significance, writes Release International's Alex Smythe

Praying and praising in the face of adversity

Pastor Richard Wurmbrand, who was imprisoned for 14 years in communist Romania, once said: *'I have found truly jubilant Christians only in the Bible, in the Underground Church and in prison.'*

Today thousands of Christians languish in prisons around the world for their faith. And it is hard to even put an exact figure on the number since in many repressive countries, such as China and North Korea, the authorities are deliberately opaque when it comes to information regarding the incarceration of Christians.

The imprisonment of Christians for their faith is nothing new, however. In Acts 16:16-40 we read about Paul and Silas in jail. Even though they'd been beaten and thrown into prison with their feet shackled, they sang hymns and prayed. Their praise in such a dire situation caused those around them to take notice and listen to them.

Their praise not only helped them but also those who listened. An earthquake shook the prison, and the doors flew open. Everyone's chains came loose.

Roman law required jailers to take personal responsibility for prisoners. If Paul and Silas (and other prisoners) had bolted when their chains came loose, the jailer would have possibly been put to death so, by not escaping, they saved his life.

Their response also changed lives eternally. Paul and Silas chose to stay in the difficult circumstance they were in (prison), when they could so easily

have escaped their suffering. That example drew the jailer to realise that there was something different about them and he wanted whatever they had.

In an incredible act of discernment, Paul knew not to run. He knew God was working and using the bad situation for something good. As a result the jailer was saved.

There are many lessons to learn from Paul and Silas in prison and they're applicable to Christians in prison today for their faith and indeed our Christian lives today.

When we're suffering in a bad situation, our instinct is to escape. We don't want to experience pain if there is any way of avoiding it.

However, just like Paul and Silas, we can lift up our prayers in times of trouble to our God who cares. It is also vital that we pray for Christians in prison today – some who will be undergoing unimaginable suffering.

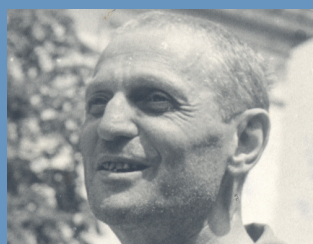
Of course it is easier to praise God when life is going well but we can still raise our voices when trouble comes because He cares – for us and for our brothers and sisters behind bars! So let's be encouraged to pray ceaselessly for Christians in prison.

The world looks to see how Christians will act and what we'll do when we're in a bad situation. A good example such as that of Paul and Silas's may change lives.

Their amazing demonstration of faith by staying in prison when they could have easily escaped affected other prisoners and the jailer.

Of course Paul didn't plan to go to prison yet he was willing to submit to God, continuing to praise Him even in shackles. His willingness to suffer and yet find joy in the moment is a great example to us and to the countless Christians around the world who are similarly willing to suffer for their faith today.

INSPIRING FAITH



'[Western Christians] can help us best by leading the lives of consistent Christians, lives of sacrifice, [and] by protesting publicly as often as Christians are persecuted.'

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 extracts from *Sabina* DVD, study guide, *Wurmbrand* book and other stories
- 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 me 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. If you receive the additional tax relief due to you, you must include all ask HM Revenue and Customs to adjust your tax code.

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Thank you!

Yes, I want to partner with Release International

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Banks and Building Societies may not accept Direct Debit Instructions for some types of account. PLEASE COMPLETE YOUR NAME AND ADDRESS ON THE PREVIOUS PAGE. THIS FORM CANNOT BE PROCESSED WITHOUT THEM.

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Please return to Release in the Freepost envelope provided.
Or to **FREEPOST RELEASE INTERNATIONAL**

www.releaseinternational.org 01689 823491 Charity Reg No 280577 (Scotland: SC040456)

R120

A Direct Debit is simple to set up

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 around 30 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@relaseinternational.org or use the enclosed response card.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
Voice
of Persecuted Christians

prayershield

October – December 2023



'Jameela' from Pakistan had to flee after her husband threatened to kill her and her sons when she became a Christian

OCTOBER 2023

*Heavenly Father,
Lord of heaven and earth,
You see me, You care for me.*

*Though I walk through
the valley of the shadow of
death, I need not be afraid
because You are with me
(Psalm 23).*

*Father, remind those in my
persecuted church family
who feel forgotten and
afraid that You love them
deeply. Reassure them that
all things are possible in You.*

*Thank You that in our
weakness, Your strength is
made perfect.*

Amen

PAKISTAN

SUNDAY 1: Pray for Christians in Maryam Town, Sargodha district, Punjab, where thousands fled their homes after posters offensive to Islam were pasted on mosque walls in July, sparking protests.

MONDAY 2: Pray for the family of Abdul Rauf, a young English teacher who was shot dead in Turbat, Balochistan province, in August after being accused of blasphemy by his students.

TUESDAY 3: Pray for justice for Imran Rehman who has been charged with blasphemy, and more recently terrorism, over material he is alleged to have posted via a social-messaging service. He denies all charges.

**'You prepare a table
before me in the
presence of my
enemies.'**

Psalms 23:5

WEDNESDAY 4: Pray for Christian converts from Islam in Pakistan who are often persecuted by family members. 'Jameela' (pictured) had to flee from her husband when he threatened to kill her and their sons after she turned to Christ.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

voice
of Persecuted Christians

THURSDAY 5: The newly passed Criminal Laws (Amendment) Act 2023 increases the punishment for insulting Islam's prophet Mohammed and his family to a minimum of ten years. Pray for increased legal protection for minorities vulnerable to accusations of blasphemy.

FRIDAY 6: Thousands of extremists attacked up to 19 churches and hundreds of Christian homes in Jaranwala, Punjab, in August following allegations that a copy of the Koran had been desecrated. Pray for the many Christians who are now without homes or churches.

SATURDAY 7: Punjab's government is investigating reports that the Jaranwala riots in August were carefully co-ordinated attacks. Pray for justice for families affected by the violence.

SUNDAY 8: Ask God to multiply the efforts of our partners as they work tirelessly to meet the practical and spiritual needs of Christians made homeless by the Jaranwala riots.

MONDAY 9: Pray for the three children of Shazia Imran, a Christian widow from Lahore who was abducted and brutally murdered after refusing to convert to Islam and marry one of her kidnappers.

TUESDAY 10: Pray for peace in communities in Pakistan and beyond, following the public burning of the Koran in Sweden. Pray that any attempts to whip up anti-Christian sentiment will fail.



Christians in Jaranwala, Pakistan, were forced to meet outdoors after rioters destroyed many local churches

WEDNESDAY 11: Pray for Christian Haroon Shahzad from Sargodha who has been charged with blasphemy after he shared on Facebook Bible verses to which local Muslims took offence.

THURSDAY 12: Zaki Masih from Chak 98 Shumaali village has been accused of blasphemy over a Facebook post that he denies sharing. His village's Muslim cleric denies it is blasphemous. Pray the case against Zaki will be dropped.

FRIDAY 13: Pray for swift justice for the many people in Pakistan who have been accused of blasphemy but not yet tried.

SATURDAY 14: Pray that Christians in Pakistan will have the wisdom and grace to know how to interact peacefully with their Muslim neighbours, and share God's love.

had reportedly been in prison for about ten years. Ask God to help them to rebuild their lives.

MONDAY 16: Continue to pray for the release of church leaders arbitrarily detained in Eritrea, including Pastor Haile Naizgi and Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel, who have been jailed since 2004.

TUESDAY 17: Ask God to speak to the hearts and minds of the officials responsible for the arbitrary detention of Eritrean Christians, including their prison guards.

WEDNESDAY 18: Continue to pray for former prisoner of faith Aster, whose twin sister Azieb died after they were both severely beaten in jail. Aster, who now lives in France, says she has no bitterness towards their torturers.

INDONESIA

THURSDAY 19: In Riau Islands province, about 30 people used hammers and clubs to damage a Pentecostal Mission Church in Indonesia building under

ERITREA

SUNDAY 15: Praise God for the recent release of seven women and six men, all Christians, who

construction in Kabil. Pray for reparations and protection for this church.

FRIDAY 20: Pray for wisdom for the Mawar Sharon Church in Tanjung Morawa, North Sumatra province. There have been demonstrations against its use of a warehouse for a Sunday service and against plans to construct a worship building nearby.

SATURDAY 21: Pray that God will intervene to remove barriers set up against Indonesian churches which are applying to build new premises. One church which received approval in April had waited 15 years.

SUNDAY 22: Pray that officials will intervene to stop militants and hardliners disrupting church activities. Bethel Indonesia Church in Riau city, Sumatra, and a Bethel Indonesia Church in Cilame, West Java, were recently forced to stop services.

MONDAY 23: The Indonesian Pentecostal Church in Sungai Barar, Sumatra, has completed its new building, with all necessary permits. Ask God to remove one final hurdle: opponents have built a wall to block the only road to the church.

TUESDAY 24: Pray for wisdom for Pastor Elysson Lase More who leads a house church near Jakarta. Protesters interrupted a worship meeting in a private home in June.

WEDNESDAY 25: Thank God that the mayor of the Solo area of central Java ordered the removal of a banner proclaiming 'Allah is greater'

that opponents had hung on the door of the Javanese Christian Church.

THURSDAY 26: Ask God to encourage and give wisdom to church leaders as they seek ways for their congregations to gather for worship and teaching peacefully.

FRIDAY 27: President Joko Widodo has told regional leaders not to let 'agreements' between local officials override constitutional guarantees of religious freedom. Pray that the Government will go further in defending minorities' rights.

IRAN

SATURDAY 28: Ask God to comfort Mehdi 'Yasser' Akbari, who is serving ten years in jail for being part of an 'illegal' church. He is still grieving for his only son, Amir-Ali, who died in care in 2021: Mehdi was not allowed to attend the funeral.

SUNDAY 29: Thank God that Joseph Shahbazian has had his sentence reduced from ten years to two following a retrial. He was arrested in a raid on a house church in 2020.

MONDAY 30: 'Tabitha' was forced to flee Iran after she told others about the miraculous way God healed her of stomach cancer. Pray that God will meet all her needs.

TUESDAY 31: Pray that the Iranian authorities will recognise that gathering for worship is a right for all citizens, including Christians with a Muslim background.

NOVEMBER 2023 SRI LANKA

WEDNESDAY 1: Buddhist nationalism is on the rise across Sri Lanka, as well as an increase in Hindu fundamentalism in the north and east. Pray for Christian communities facing persecution from both Hindus and Buddhists.

THURSDAY 2: Pray for the Good Shepherd Church in Polonnaruwa whose ministry includes overseeing a drug rehabilitation centre. Three Christian workers at the centre were recently attacked by opponents.

FRIDAY 3: Pray that the gospel message of God's love and acceptance will reach those in the Polonnaruwa area who oppose the work of the Good Shepherd Church with marginalised groups.

SATURDAY 4: Pray for the pastor of the Jesus Lives Glorious Church in Karuwalagaswewa who was recently refused permission to put a Christian headstone on his son's grave in a public cemetery.

SUNDAY 5: Pray for Pastor Lalith, a former Buddhist monk who faces persecution, including from monks who were formerly his colleagues. His home has been attacked and his water supply cut off.

MONDAY 6: Pastor Indrajith has received death threats and his church and congregation have been attacked by a mob. But praise God that some of his former opponents have



Pastor Chandrapala and his family have faced opposition to their church from the entire village in Sri Lanka

become friends and even followers of Jesus.

TUESDAY 7: Christian children are often refused entry to state schools. Pray for the work of our partners and church leaders to help children overcome these barriers.

WEDNESDAY 8: Pray for Pastor Chandrapala (pictured), a former Buddhist, who has faced stiff opposition to his church from his entire village. Locals have wrongly accused him of holding illegal meetings, even though his meetings are lawful.

THURSDAY 9: Thank God for our partner in Sri Lanka which is training lawyers across the country to defend Christians in cases where religious rights are violated.

FRIDAY 10: Pray that believers in Sri Lanka will overcome the strategies of the enemy to silence the church and be a strong witness to all those who need to hear the gospel.

SATURDAY 11: Ask God to protect a residence for persecuted Christians needing sanctuary, which is run by a Release International partner.

INDIA

SUNDAY 12: Pray for ethnic Kuki Christians in Manipur state, the target of widespread violence in June as protesters in the mostly Hindu Meitei community demanded Scheduled Tribe status. Almost 200 people were killed and 60,000 displaced.

MONDAY 13: Pray for the family of ethnic Kuki Christian Domkhohoi Haokip who was killed in church as she prayed after Meitei gunmen invaded her village, Khoken, during widespread violence in June.

'Now that they have torn down the churches and burned them, where do the people run to?'

Pastor Kamzamang, after widespread anti-Christian violence, Manipur

TUESDAY 14: Hindu nationalists appear to be trying to sow anti-Christian hatred among Meitei Hindus, to help advance their cause in the region. Pray against any effort to stir up discord and intolerance.

WEDNESDAY 15: Pray for the families of Meitei Christians Meena Hangsing, her son Tonsing and her neighbour, Lydia Lourembam, who were burnt alive when a mob set upon the ambulance taking them to hospital during the June riots.

THURSDAY 16: Pray for Liju Kuriakose from Kerala who is facing charges of human trafficking and forced conversion of eight students from Chhattisgarh state whom he was escorting to a Bible institute.

FRIDAY 17: Pray for Pastor Harendra Singh, his wife Priya and their young son who have been arrested in Uttar Pradesh. The couple have been accused of 'luring innocent people to Christianity'.

SATURDAY 18: Pray for Pastor Amarjeet Ram and 14 other Christians who were arrested at a prayer meeting in Balapur, Uttar Pradesh, and released on bail.

SUNDAY 19: Amid increasing religious tensions ahead of the general election next spring, pray that Christians will find ways to share the love of God with those around them.

BURKINA FASO

MONDAY 20: Islamist activity has increased sharply in Burkina Faso, and Christians have been the primary targets since April 2019. Pray for God's people in this troubled land.

TUESDAY 21: Pray for believers in areas being targeted by jihadists where hundreds of churches have been closed. Many are going hungry too as Burkina Faso suffers a severe humanitarian crisis.

WEDNESDAY 22: As many as 10,000 Christians have fled their homes because of threats and violent attacks. Ask God to meet their needs and pray for an end to the Islamist insurgency.

THURSDAY 23: Pray for wisdom, courage and strength for church leaders in Burkina Faso. One pastor said: 'Everyone in my church has been traumatised. Because I am carrying all this burden, I have been traumatised.'

UGANDA

FRIDAY 24: Pray for the families of the 42 children and staff killed by militants linked to Islamic State during a massacre at the mainly Christian Lhubiriha

Secondary School in Mpondwe, western Uganda, in June.

SATURDAY 25: Pray for the return of eight children abducted during the June attack on Lhubiriha Secondary School. Three were reported to have been rescued by the army.

SUNDAY 26: Pray for Pastor Davidson Okirori of Mayuge district, eastern Uganda, who was attacked and beaten unconscious by hard-line Muslims after he contrasted Jesus with Mohammed at a funeral.

MONDAY 27: Pray for the wife and three-year-old son of Abudu Amisi who was killed by people in his village in Pallisa district two weeks after he put his faith in Christ.

TUESDAY 28: Pray that the Ugandan Government will do more to uphold religious freedom, including the right to share one's beliefs and convert from one faith to another.

WEDNESDAY 29: Pray for the pastors whom Release International associate ministries are supporting to stand in the face of growing Islamist extremism. Pray they will keep their eyes on Jesus.

THURSDAY 30: Pray for the church in the Sahel and sub-Saharan regions of Africa which many see as the new epicentre of world terrorism. Islamic State is rallying jihadists to migrate to the region.

DECEMBER 2023

ALGERIA

FRIDAY 1: Thank God for the presidential pardon given to Hamid Soudad who was serving a five-year sentence for blasphemy, after he shared a caricature of Islam's prophet Mohammed on social media.

SATURDAY 2: Continue to intercede for this North African nation, praying that our Algerian brothers and sisters will be granted freedom to worship God and share the gospel.

SUNDAY 3: Pray for four pastors presently facing trial. The accusations against them include holding a church service in a home and producing Christian media content.

MONDAY 4: It is believed that only ten churches remain open throughout the whole of Algeria: 30 have been closed since 2017. Pray that the church in Algeria will find creative and fruitful ways to enjoy fellowship.

TUESDAY 5: Thank God that Algerian Christians continue to proclaim the gospel boldly. Pray that persecution will continue to lead to significant church growth, in Algeria and across northern Africa.

LAOS

WEDNESDAY 6: Pray for believers in Laos who often face discrimination and oppression. Christians are

reportedly excluded from government humanitarian aid distributions.

THURSDAY 7: When Jai refused to recant his Christian faith, he lost his seat on the village council. Then local officials killed all his pigs and poultry, which were his livelihood. Pray that God will provide for him and his wife, Tai.

FRIDAY 8: Pray for Christian children in the Laotian village where Jai (above) lives. The local council rules that children under the age of 18 are not allowed to attend church.

SATURDAY 9: Pray for a dozen Christian families and their pastor who were driven out of Mai, a mainly Buddhist village in Luang Namtha province, following their conversion to Christianity.

CHINA

SUNDAY 10: Officials raided a children's summer camp run by the Xuncheng (Zion) Reformed Church. Four leaders were given 15-day 'administrative detention'. Pray that the children, who witnessed the raid, will stand firm in their faith.

MONDAY 11: Xuncheng Reformed Church and its leaders have long suffered persecution: Pastor An Yankui and Zhang Chenghao were detained for a year after attending a conference in Malaysia in 2020. Ask God to encourage them in their faithful ministry.

TUESDAY 12: Pray for several leaders and members of Golden Lampstand Church in Linfen who are currently on trial for 'fraud'. Their building was forcibly demolished in 2018.

WEDNESDAY 13: Among the members of Golden Lampstand Church, Linfen, on trial for fraud are Pastor Wang Xiaoguang and his wife, Yang Rongli. Pray for this faithful couple who are said to be in poor health after two years behind bars.

THURSDAY 14: Pray for four Christians from Shingjia Church in Shunde, including Pastor Deng Yanxiang, who were arrested in May on suspicion of 'illegal business practices'. They were detained beyond the term of their 30-day 'administrative detention'.

FRIDAY 15: Please pray for a fifth Christian from Shingjia Church, elder Zhu Longfei, who was arrested in August, also on suspicion of illegal business practices. He is detained at the same centre as his sister and brother.

SATURDAY 16: Pray for Pastor Ru Zongren of Chengxi Christian Church in Anhui, whom police hand-cuffed to his hospital bed for five hours during dialysis treatment. It appears the motive was to silence him during a visit of senior communist officials.

SUNDAY 17: Continue to pray for members of the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church (also known as the Mayflower Church) as they re-establish



A Hausa Bible that survived an attack on a Nigerian village is opened at Philippians 4

their lives in Texas, after fleeing persecution in China.

MONDAY 18: Pray for wisdom for Pastor Huang Xiaoning of Guangzhou Bible Reformed Church in Guangdong province. Officials are pressuring him to join the government-sanctioned Three-Self Church: he responds by sharing the gospel with them.

TUESDAY 19: Continue to pray against the Chinese Communist Party's attempts to 'sinicise' Christianity. A recent training meeting for leaders of state-sanctioned Three-Self Church congregations urged them to resist the influence of foreign churches.

WEDNESDAY 20: Pray for wisdom for individual church leaders as they consider how to respond to the communist

'sinicisation' programme. Officials in Zhejiang province raised a banner displaying the communist hammer and sickle next to the Shinian Christian Church.

NIGERIA

THURSDAY 21: Pray that Christians in central Plateau state will know God's comfort and presence after more than 150 believers were killed there in the space of three weeks.

FRIDAY 22: Thank God that officials in Mangu area, Plateau state, imposed a curfew, following attacks on Christian communities. Pray that officials will do more to curb the violence and unrest.

SATURDAY 23: Thank God for the unity that our partner reports among Christians

in the internally displaced people's camps of Mangu, Plateau state. 'No one is talking about denominations here,' he says. 'They are but Christians!'

PRAYERS FOR CHRISTMAS

CHRISTMAS EVE: As we recall how 'there was no room' for Mary and Joseph seeking shelter (Luke 2:7), we pray that God will provide for those who are made to feel like outcasts because of their faith in Him. Pray that He will overwhelm them with His love.

CHRISTMAS DAY: As we celebrate our Saviour's birth, let's pray that the joy of the Lord and His covenant promises will be alive to His church today, so that our witness causes others to seek Him too.

BOXING DAY: Please ask God to protect our persecuted church family in Nigeria and worldwide at this festive time. Ask Him to hide them in the shadow of His wings (Psalm 17:8).

WEDNESDAY 27: Pray for believers in Benue state where more than 40 Christians were killed in June and at least 37 died in just three weeks in July. They included six Christians in Ushongo county, killed by attackers on motorbikes.

THURSDAY 28: In Taraba state, militants killed 20 Christians in Takum. Pray that the Government will



Fulani militants in Nigeria caused extensive damage to Ta'azia's home

heed pastors' calls for greater protection for Christian communities nationally.

FRIDAY 29: Ta'azia's home (pictured) was badly damaged when Fulani militants attacked her village. Thank God that Ta'azia's home has been repaired: pray for the thousands of others now living in camps for displaced people.

Sources: Article 18; AsiaNews: China Aid; Dawn; International Christian Concern; Middle East Concern; Morning Star News; Radio Free Asia; Release International partners and contacts; UCA News; 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.

SATURDAY 30: Cry out to God for an end to the brutal persecution of Christians in Nigeria which has lasted two decades now.

SUNDAY 31: On the eve of a new year, let's ask God to reassure our persecuted church family that He has done, and will do again, 'wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure' (Isaiah 25:1, ESV).

Lord Jesus

Prince of Peace, You came to restore all that is broken. In You, all things are made new.

Lord, bring peace to troubled nations, reconcile warring communities, bind up broken hearts.

Please fill my persecuted family with all joy and peace as they trust You so that they 'may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit' (Romans 15:13).

Your kingdom come, Your will be done.

Amen

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Release International, PO Box 54, Orpington BR5 4RT
Tel: 01689 823491 Email: info@releaseinternational.org
Registered Charity 280577 (Scotland: SC040456)

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