

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

OCT-DEC 2024

voice

of Persecuted Christians

HELPING THE
FAMILIES OF
CHRISTIAN
MARTYRS

Believers rise
from the depths
*Overcoming trauma
in Nigeria*

Rebuilding
widows' lives
*Hope for bereaved
in Burkina Faso*

International
Day of Prayer
*Join us for special
2024 online event*

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



Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

Helped through
the darkest
times

In this edition of *Voice*, we have dedicated eight pages to the situation in Nigeria where Christians continue to struggle following attacks by armed bandits and terrorists.

What is shocking is how those they have perceived as 'neighbours', with whom they talked to regularly and even did business with, could suddenly turn on the Christian community and kill innocent men, women and even children.

How can people carry out such wanton violence against those they live next to? It is hard to imagine. If you think about your own neighbours, you may have disagreements, but it would be almost unimaginable for this to develop into the sort of brutality we see on a regular basis in northern Nigeria.

Whatever the causes that are heralded – climate change forcing cattle herders to seek new grazing land or a quest for minerals – ultimately, we know there is a religious and spiritual dimension: after all there is a clear pattern of Christians and their properties being attacked and churches being burned down.

Even though I weep and grieve when I hear such stories as those we feature on pages 6-13, nevertheless I am also encouraged. When I read how pastor Gideon lost his wife and children and has struggled in his faith – and yet has come through – I am inspired. If this man, and so many others like him, can trust God after all he has suffered, then I know I too can come through anything; yes, my faith may be shaken at times but, ultimately, I can still trust and follow Him.

I am also inspired by seeing how our partners and you, our supporters, through love and action, have provided survivors such as Gideon and Esther with the practical and pastoral help they have so desperately needed. Your prayers and financial support have strengthened these believers and helped them through their darkest hour. Thank you.

REGULAR SUPPORT

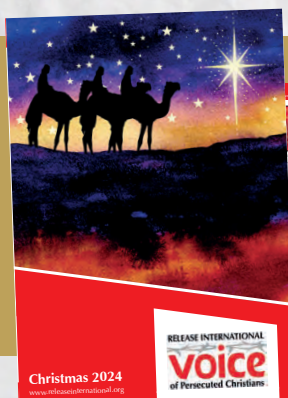
Giving regularly to Release International through a Direct Debit enables us more easily to plan how we can support partners such as Stefanos Foundation in Nigeria who have cared for persecuted Christians such as Gideon and Esther. Please see page 21 for details.

IDOP 2024

What persecuted Christians request the most from us are our prayers, because they know that God responds to the prayers of his people. Pastor Gideon tells us that the prayers of Christians helped him to keep going after the loss of his family. So please do make full use of the Prayer Shield diary inside *Voice*, and, if you are able, join us for a special online event as part of the annual International Day of Prayer for the persecuted church (IDOP) on November 3 (see page 18).

ONLINE SURVEY

Your views about Release International really do matter to us. We want to know how to improve and how to serve our persecuted family more effectively, so please do take the opportunity to complete our online supporter survey (see page 19).



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 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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FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR

Faith under fire

Herdsman join bandits to attack believers

Fulani herdsmen reportedly teamed up with a criminal gang to attack a village in central Nigeria in August, killing at least 50 Christians.

Officials who found 30 bodies said the toll was likely to be higher as many other villagers were taken to outlying areas where they were likely killed. Two local residents, who identified the raiders as 'Fulani herdsmen militia', said at least 50 lost their lives in the attack on the predominantly Christian village of Ayati in Ukum County, Benue state.

According to Shima Ayati, a local resident and former candidate for governor, a criminal gang had fraudulently 'sold' the farmers' land to the herdsmen. Ayati reportedly said that when the herdsmen began grazing their cattle on the land, the village farmers complained to government officials. When security forces then forced the herdsmen off the land, they are understood to have teamed up with the bandits and attacked the village.

(Source: Christian Daily International-Morning Star News)

Ugandan evangelist killed by sword-wielding extremists

Militants armed with swords in eastern Uganda killed a Christian for leading Muslims to Christ, sources said.

The assailants attacked Yowabu Sebakaki on August 19 as he was returning home by bicycle to his native Nyanza village in Budaka District. He was aged 52.

In June and July extremists had sent threatening messages to Sebakaki, including one that read, 'We are aware of some secret meeting you are undertaking. You have to stop preaching as well as converting our faithful Muslims to Christianity, and if not, then soon we are coming for your life,' according to his wife, Nambaluka Sebakaki, who had copied the messages to her phone.

After leading a discipleship class at 5.45pm for new converts at a Christian's house, Sebakaki was being taken home by David Nkomba on Nkomba's bicycle.

'Just when we were 5km from reaching the homestead, at around 6.20, a motorcycle came up just behind us, and in no given time Sebakaki was struck with an object which happened to be a panga [long Somali sword] on the back near the neck,' Nkomba told Morning Star News. 'He fell down and then was cut by another panga at the head. Sebakaki became unconscious due to too much bleeding.'

Nkomba said he jumped off his bike as other attackers were shouting: 'Your time has come ... pray hard if your God will save you. You have been deceiving people about life after death given by Issa [Jesus].'

Nkomba said: 'I took off, but I managed to recognise one of the attackers.'

Neighbours arrived at the scene and rushed Sebakaki to a hospital in Mbale, but he died on the way, his wife said.

(Source: Morning Star News)

Pastor shot dead in Laos



Thongkham Philavanh, pictured with his wife

Pastor Thongkham Philavanh was feeding his chickens and ducks behind his house in Vanghay village, northwestern Laos, on July 22 when two men on motorcycles with their faces covered arrived at his property.

After a brief exchange, one of the men took out a gun fitted with a silencer and fired seven shots at his head and body.

The two escaped as Pastor Thongkham, who was aged 40, was rushed to a provincial hospital, where he died on arrival. He is

survived by his wife and two teenage children.

Police are investigating the killing in Xai District, Oudomxay Province, which comes on the heels of the torture and killing of Pastor Seetoud of Don Keo village in central Laos's Khammouane Province in October 2022. Village officials had warned him to stop all Christian gatherings and activities. The case is still unresolved, and the killers are still at large.

Pastor Thongkham was a tribal Khmu leader and provincial head of the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC), and had been actively sharing the gospel, screening the Jesus film and hosting trainings for pastors.

A week before he was killed, LEC leaders had gathered to dedicate the expansion of the church building as the congregation had grown.

According to local Christians, Pastor Thongkham was closely monitored by the authorities and had been warned several times to stop his 'Christian activities'.

(Source: Morning Star News)

Listen to our latest podcasts



BURKINA FASO: FACING THE RISING TIDE

Across sub-Saharan Africa, Christian communities are coming under increased pressure from various militant, Islamist groups. Violent attacks in northern Nigeria have been well documented in recent years, but in this edition of Release International's *Voice* podcast we speak to staff member John Lawson about another country in that region; one that we hear far less about: Burkina Faso.

CHINA'S CHRISTIANS: A HARSH WINTER?

China is a country that is rarely out of the news. But what does it mean to be a Christian in China today? And what are the challenges currently facing believers there? According to our partner Bob Fu, a harsh winter is descending on the church with a government that seems intent on wiping out Christianity. Listen to our latest podcast as Bob tells us what encourages him and ways in which we can pray.

ALGERIA: TIMES OF GROWTH, TIMES OF ADVERSITY

Pressure on the small, Protestant church in Algeria has been growing in recent years. New laws have brought crackdowns, church closures and arrests. In this edition of the *Voice* podcast we speak to our partner in Algeria about the current situation, what a difference Release International support has been making there and how you can pray for Christians in that country.

IRAQ: COURAGE TO BE A LIGHT Release International has, for a number of years, supported persecuted Christians who have fled to the safer haven of the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq. In this edition of the *Voice* podcast we speak to Ano Jawhar, a Christian politician in Kurdistan, who tells us about past persecution, the present nature of the region – and the dangerous mindset of militant groups such as Islamic State.

'Mother of Satan' bomb plot foiled

Authorities in Indonesia arrested a 19-year-old student and member of an Islamic extremist group and his parents, foiling a suicide bomb attack on two church sites, officials said.

The high school student identified only by his initials, H.O.K, was arrested as he was on his way to dispose of evidence in Malang Regency, East Java, said Anti-Terror Special Detachment 88 spokesperson Aswin Siregar at a press conference in Jakarta in August.

Siregar said H.O.K had become a member online of Philippines-based *Dawlah Islamiyah*, said to be affiliated with Islamic State (ISIS), and that he and accomplices were planning to carry out suicide bombings using Triacetone Triperoxide (TATP) explosives at two Christian churches in Malang Regency.

TATP, widely known as the 'Mother of Satan', is one of the most powerful and dangerous explosives. Preliminary investigations indicated that H.O.K. often accessed various websites containing *Dawlah Islamiyah* propaganda that led him to try to carry out suicide bombings, Siregar said.

(Source: Morning Star News)

Twelve-year-old forcibly married in Pakistan



Parveen Shaukat holds a photo of her daughter

A Muslim in Pakistan abducted, forcibly converted and married a 12-year-old Christian girl as police delayed efforts to recover her, say family members.

Parveen Shaukat, a widow and mother of eight, said that her youngest daughter, Fairy Shaukat, had been abducted in the Kasur District of Punjab province, on August 9.

'Fairy had gone to a nearby shop to buy groceries in the afternoon, but she did not return home,' Shaukat told Christian Daily International-

Morning Star News. 'My sons started searching for her but could not find her. We then filed a complaint with the police, but their attitude was not welcoming. Instead of helping us, they delayed the registration of a First Information Report (FIR).'

She said that a neighbour later informed the family that he had seen the man abduct Fairy.

'We informed the police about the accused, but they still did not take any action, giving sufficient time to [the man] to convert the minor child and contract an Islamic marriage with her,' Shaukat said.

The impoverished mother said that police finally registered an FIR on August 10 but were slow to make efforts to recover the child.

'On August 13, my sons received the Nikahnama [Islamic marriage certificate] of Fairy through WhatsApp from an unknown number,' she said. 'We were shocked to see the document and urged the police to take action against this underage marriage. When the police finally raided the house of the accused, he was not there. It's nearly 20 days now that I haven't seen my child, and we have no information about her safety.'

Shaukat said, 'My heart sinks every time I think of how she is being treated in captivity.'

• Three girls illegally detained by their employers were forced to testify that they had converted to Islam and wished to return to their captors, but a judge in Pakistan returned them to their Christian parents, sources said.

Justice Shakil Ahmed of the Lahore High Court allowed the sisters, aged 9, 13 and 16, to retract their forced claims and gave custody back to their parents, Naveed Masih and wife Mina Naveed, brick kiln workers in Kasur District, Punjab province, in August, said Katherine Sapna, executive director of the legal advocacy group, Christians True Spirit.

(Source: Christian Daily International-Morning Star News)

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Believers rise from the depths of despair


On a recent trip to Nigeria, Alex Smythe met Christians who have been traumatised by the killing of loved ones, have doubted God and yet have come through to a deeper relationship with their Saviour

I cannot begin to imagine the sorrow Gideon Dawell must carry in his heart after his wife and children were brutally killed by militants in Plateau state. And his story, as we know from a number of visits to Nigeria over the past two decades, is far from unique.

On this occasion we interviewed several survivors of attacks and many are on what I would call a journey of forgiveness – letting go of the anger but still carrying the pain of deep loss.

A native of Mbong village in Plateau state, Gideon told me how his life changed forever last Christmas when, within the space of a few hours, a time of celebration turned into the worst nightmare imaginable.

'Villagers gathered for Christmas



Gideon Dawell lost his wife and children in the attack on his village

villages for refuge, as tensions were brewing between Fulani and other locals. I was reassured that the influx was peaceful, without cause for alarm.

'Little did I know that a mere 30 minutes later, those visitors would attack us.'

Feeling reassured, Gideon went to take a bath and then left his house with some other men and went to keep watch over the perimeter of the village.

'We were at least 2km away from my house as darkness fell,' he continued.

'Upon returning, we heard men shouting "Allahu akbar!" accompanied by gunshots and the sight of a house on fire. Quickly, we hid, before re-emerging to see more houses burning. Fulani were shouting "Allahu akbar!" The noise of gunshots filled the air. We were unable to confront the intruders as they continued setting fire to properties, attacking the community.'

Worse was to follow for Gideon. *'My house was in a compound so I believe that when they came to the gate and my wife saw them, she went inside with our children and they locked themselves in a room. Then the Fulani set the room on fire. My wife and my five children were burnt to ashes, with no escape.*

'I lost everything: my wife, Hanna, my daughters, Lois, Patience, Success and Doris, and my son, Rohi.'

'Everything I now have was provided by Stefanos: the food I eat, the clothes I wear, the shelter I have'

Along with other survivors in the village Gideon cannot stop thinking about the events of that Christmas Eve. In fact his community was not the only one to be attacked in Plateau state that night. In all 238 Christians were killed during raids on 40 villages.

Gideon said: *'We wonder why this happened. I believe the Fulani wanted our fertile land: land grabbing by violence, using sophisticated weapons. Another motivation is religion; the cause of Jihad typified by shouts of*

"Allahu Akbar!" My family, my people, are regarded as "infidels" and such bloodshed is carried out in the name of "Allah".'

I asked Gideon to describe what life has been like for him and the community since the devastation.

'It's chaotic. Villagers have nothing to eat. They roam about because provisions have been destroyed. Even those who escaped have nothing. Life is very dangerous. In the village, when fellow villagers saw me, we started crying. I see the graves of my children. I remember my house. I recall the horrors of the attack and how we were hiding and running. We cry with those who have returned. Life is so bleak.'

Unsurprisingly his faith was shaken and he admits that, *'I lost faith for some of the time, and no longer believed Jesus existed. I had preached Jesus as a pastor, but in my hour of need I felt like He didn't know I existed. How could He take away my family and all that I have? God's word says, "I know the plans I have for you" Is this the plan? It was a terrible experience.'*

However, Gideon has seen the hand of God working to bring comfort and practical help through Release International partners, Stefanos Foundation.

'Now, I thank God, with tears, for Stefanos. They gave me food, a bed, somewhere to sleep. Everything I owned was lost in the attack by the Fulani. Everything I now have was provided by Stefanos: the food I eat, the clothes I wear, the shelter I have. They provided spiritual and emotional support too.'

Stefanos, which has been taking Gideon through its trauma-healing programme, told me: *'For Gideon, who lost all his family, we have also provided a house for him so that he can be under our close care.'*

I asked Gideon if there was a possibility the villagers could rebuild their lives and life can return to some degree of normality.

'Since it is our ancestral land, people will go back. Some are farming again. Police and security agencies are deployed. The community manages

Eve celebrations, the tradition being for everyone to go to the place where cattle are butchered for the celebratory meal,' he said.

'I went too, at around 6pm, then back to my house, a 30-minute trek. Approaching home, I saw my Fulani neighbours there, with more cattle than I've ever seen before, and called out to one of them: "Friend!" This man was staying in one of my houses, doing business transactions with my wife, a businesswoman, who was able to negotiate fair deals for them regarding maize cattle feed. They pay her, and the Fulani and my people live well, side-by-side.

'I asked him about the large number of cattle, and he explained that some Fulani friends had come from distant

with what they can get. Some dwellings were not set alight, and the men are there; women and children are in town.'

I wondered how these events had affected Gideon as a pastor, and how this has affected his church community.

'The church I was pastoring had over 100 members. Suddenly, they were displaced. Some were killed. They've become poorer, and the congregation is no longer there. Everyone has gone to safe places, especially women and children, while a few men remain, meeting under a tree to worship. The church building was burnt down and there is nothing much left.'

'I thank God for the prayers of faithful people. Negative thoughts departed because of those prayers'

'However, I was privileged to attend another church recently where the pastor invited me to preach. Initially I refused, but as the pastor insisted, I shared my testimony. The whole church cried with me.'

He said: 'When I was despairing, I looked away from Christ. Nevertheless, I thank God for the prayers of faithful people. God has taken me back to my state of trusting Him. Negative thoughts departed because of those prayers. I now know that the wisdom of God is more than the wisdom of men. His plan is more than the plan of man. His thoughts are not our thoughts. He allowed this to happen for a purpose. God preserved me for the sake of the gospel: I'm alive to spread the message.'

Gideon added: 'When I returned to the village, one of the Fulani saw me and called out, "Pastor!" I replied, "How are you?" at which point he cried. "Pastor, you came back and greeted me. No one greets me, as I am Fulani." I told him: "I greeted you because I know the Person I serve."

'He was deeply affected when I accepted his handshake. So, now, if I see a Fulani man, I offer forgiveness. I pray for him.'

Gideon's account of forgiveness is remarkable and a testament to the empowering of God's grace but he needs our ongoing prayers: for strength, comfort and peace, especially when he remembers the traumatic events of last Christmas. As a sign of how his faith has been restored he asked us to pray that God would give him further anointing for evangelism!

Partners provide the only help for grieving believer

Another Christian we met whose loved ones had been martyred was Esther Ibrahim, from Kebbi state in the northwest of Nigeria.

Esther's village was raided by bandits on New Year's Day 2022. She lost sons and other extended family members as well as friends in the attack.

Esther said she lived in pain and despair until she was able to attend a trauma-healing workshop run by Stefanos Foundation.

She says that for the first time since the attack she had *'begun to feel comfort in my heart'*.

However, she has not returned to her old home. In fact, her brother-in-law went back to check on the family property and was killed.

'Life has been very hard for me. Help has not been coming from anywhere except the Stefanos Foundation,' she said.

Reflecting on the day of the attack she said that they had been targeted *'out of the blue'*. She added: *'We did nothing to them. We have lived with Fulani for a long while; our villages are close together.'*

Militant attacks on Christian villages are widely portrayed in the media as farmer-herder battles for land as a result of the impact of climate change but Esther recalls that the Fulani had recently sold their land to the villagers. *'After that we were just attacked,'* she said. *'We didn't cause any trouble for them before that.'*

At first Esther vowed never to forgive those responsible (even before the attack she says she hated them) but that began to change as she attended the trauma-healing workshop. *'I still don't see them as good, kind or compassionate people but I have forgiven them.'*

She asks Christians in the UK to pray that she is able totally to forgive them



Esther Ibrahim began to feel 'comfort in my heart' after attending a trauma-healing workshop run by Release International's partner

and let go of her hatred. *'I have forgiven but I still feel the pain because of the heartache they caused me. Please pray for my village and God's peace for my brethren and that God will one day return us to our home.'*

Father's action saves villagers

Rahila Rigat tells a similar story of a journey to forgiveness after her father, a pastor called Ezekiel Rigat, was killed by Fulani militants on Christmas Eve last year.

'I was in my house when he called me and said these Fulani people are advancing towards the village. I told him, "Don't be afraid; God is in control; He will do what He will decide to do".'

She described how he had picked up a machete but had then put it down, taking hold of his Bible instead and going to the church.

'He was praying in the church when the attackers came. They surrounded the church because he was ringing the bell so they thought that everyone from the village was inside, not realising that he was the only person there.'

'When they surrounded the church the people in the village were able to run away.'

Everyone was saved except for Rahila's father, who was burnt to death in the church.

As well as the church every home in the village was destroyed that day but only after the attackers had looted the properties.

Sadly, despite those from her father's village of Nungai in Bokkos local government area (LGA) in Plateau state being saved that day some have since lost their faith and have turned back to other beliefs.

She added: *'Everybody moved out of the village and went to the city so it has affected the church.'*

Rahila still struggles to understand the precise motive behind the attack. *'We never had any issues with them; there were no quarrels between the villagers and the neighbouring Fulani before this,'* she said. *'I think it was a religious issue.'*



Rahila spoke to her father just minutes before he sacrificed his life

Unsurprisingly Rahila was deeply affected by her father's death.

'However, when I sat down and thought about it, I became confident that he was now resting with the Lord. Before this happened [my father] had had a dream in which God revealed to him what would happen.'

'These people don't know God; they have not tasted the love of Christ'

'I was wondering whether I would ever forgive these people but I decided to let it go from my heart and not hold anything against them. I don't have any pain or resentment against them. My father would have been praying for God to have mercy on his killers. I pray that that prayer my father was praying will not be in vain.'

'These people don't know God; they have not tasted the love of Christ that we enjoy so I pray that God will touch them.'

She added: *'Pray that Christians in Nigeria will have courage to stand firm in their faith. Pray especially for the youth who are looking for help outside of God to protect themselves.'*

Hundreds of Christians suffered in a spate of attacks on more than 20 villages last Christmas.

'God is in control'

Gushe Moses Philemon, who comes from Dares village in Bokkos LGA, described to me how Fulani herdsmen, who had lived nearby, raided his village, killing 11 people, including his father, Majugushi, a clergyman. His uncle later died from bullet wounds in hospital.

Three had been killed on Christmas Eve, then early on Christmas Day as villagers returned to see what had happened they were attacked again. Eight more lost their lives.

'We called for help but there was no help. Soldiers were close but they didn't come and help us. So we ran for our lives; then later the soldiers came when [the militants] had already killed people.'

'We were asking them to help us so that we could go [into the village] to get the dead bodies so we could bury them, but still they were not helping us to do that. We tried our best; we even decided to go by ourselves but when we did we were attacked again. That's how the dead bodies were left there for about three days.'

Eventually soldiers agreed to accompany them so Gushe and other villagers were able to bury the dead.



Gushe is asking God for more strength

'We cannot forget because we lost many great people, but we are still hoping on God for a better future.'

Gushe described how, during the attack, the Fulani were calling them by name to stop running but anyone who complied was then cut down.

'The Fulani just want to take over the land because it is blessed with minerals,' he said.

Villagers gave officials the names of those they believed responsible but so far no one has been held to account.

Gushe said that some had returned to the village but the young people particularly had not gone back because of fear of further violence.

The killing of his father has had a deep impact on Gushe. *'We felt like God had abandoned us because (we thought) if God is truly a living God why did He allow these things to happen to us. We served him for years but these things are still happening to us. I am calling on God to give me more strength to stand by Him in whatever situation, because I know I am not the first person who has experienced this kind of situation so I am just putting my trust in God so that He will give me more strength and His Spirit will lead*

me the more, so that I can be strong in Him.

'The only thing I would say to the attackers is "God is in control!"'



Emmanuel Jennifer Malau

Emmanuel Jennifer Malau had only recently lost her husband, who unexpectedly died in his sleep, when their village, Mgar in Bokkos LGA, was attacked that Christmas Eve.

'The attackers were our friends, Fulani herdsmen,' she said.

'I can't go back to my village even after the death of my husband. Like others in the village me and my children have to look for a place of refuge. We are just trying to find shelter.'

After the raid she vowed that she would never speak to a Fulani again.

'But one day I was in the market and one man kept calling me, "Pastor's wife! Pastor's wife!" and when I turned round I saw that he was a Fulani. That got me to the point of repentance before God. As He says in His Word, "If we do not forgive others He wouldn't forgive us", so ever since then I have started praying to God for their forgiveness, knowing that, if I don't, my sins will not be forgiven me either.'

She added: *'Please remember me and my children, as a widow who has to pay their [school] fees. Pray also for our persecutors; that they would repent because unless they repent we ourselves will not experience peace. If they repent and understand that what they are doing is not right they will leave that way of life.'*



Rose Pam

Twenty-five-year-old Rose Pam, who is also from Bokkos, had returned home from church on Christmas Eve when her village was attacked. She carries the pain of her husband's sudden brutal death.

'I was with my small boy, the older brother of the baby I am holding. I caught hold of him and started running but while we were running three Fulani men chased my husband on a motorcycle; they caught him and killed him with cutlasses.'

She added: *'We were separated in such a painful way. If I had nursed my husband because of illness and he passed on it wouldn't have been this painful for me, but his death came suddenly. I am left with two children.'*

'Pray that I will remain steadfast in my faith and be able to feed and raise these children even in the absence of their father.'

She believes Fulani targeted them because of their faith in Christ.



Pastor's narrow escape

Rev Kesmen Lawrence from Bokkos LGA was at home in the early evening when he suddenly heard people shouting 'that we should run for our lives.'

He recalled: 'When I came out I heard the sound of guns everywhere. They told me that surrounding villages had been ambushed by men with guns. Then I realised that it was our neighbours, Fulani herdsmen, who had risen up against us, shooting guns at us, [and] then we began to run.'

Kesmen found somewhere to hide until the morning. When he eventually headed back to his village he came across bodies of the dead, some of whom had been members of his church.

'As I was moving, not far from where we were standing, I saw my neighbour

[a Fulani man] on a bike with a gun coming to kill me. Thank God there was a vehicle by the side and people were calling me to come. I ran to them and they picked me up and we left. We then went to a place where we were able to rest. The army was there.'

However, the soldiers initially refused to help. 'We begged them to go and help us but they did not listen. They only agreed to go and pick up some of the people who were injured and even at that we had to give them some money.'

Eventually the soldiers helped to collect some of the corpses so they could be buried.

Like Gushe, he believes the Fulani attacked because they want the land's mineral resources. In fact they were digging up the ground even as they rampaged through the village, he said.

Most concerning to the pastor is the weakening of faith of those in his community who are even returning to

some pagan practices.

'Please pray that people will depend on Christ because the faith of many has wavered. Pray that people will understand that the fact that they escaped was not by their wisdom, but it was Christ that enabled them to do so.'

• **Apart from Gideon and Esther, who were beneficiaries of trauma-healing workshops, all others interviewed were participants in a training programme for pastors funded by Release International. The programme addresses issues such as responding to those whose faith is challenged after bereavement and seeing church numbers dwindle, how to reach out to persecutors and Hostile Environment and Emergency First Aid Training.**

• All photos © Release International 2024



Land grab erupts into religious crisis

Rev Yakubu Mutong, a Church of Christ in Nations pastor in Mangu LGA in Plateau state, which was also attacked on December 24, described how 14 people in his community were killed that night as properties were burned down.

He said many residents had since fled to the cities for safety as they no longer had homes or food and sadly many of the desperate young people had fallen into drug addiction, alcoholism and prostitution.

'As a result there is no longer any worship in these villages,' he reflected.

He said what had started as a land grab had erupted into a religious crisis. Why else had churches been burned and pastors killed.

However, he hoped that one day, given adequate support and security, villagers would be able to return home.

Although the attacks had affected the faith of some believers, Yakubu himself has been encouraged.

'Pray for people to be able to really forgive ... Pray that we will have peace again.'

'Some of the things I have been preaching about have now happened to me. My house was burnt, my brothers and sisters were killed. I lost about seven people from my family. But it strengthens my faith to know that if God is by your side regardless of all the tribulations, He will

stand by you and I am more encouraged and in faith than ever before.' Having said that, he is concerned that the attacks are getting worse and asked Christians in the UK to pray that believers in affected areas would be able to stand firm in their faith.

'This crisis has affected the faith of many. People who used to worship God, people who used to evangelise and do a lot for God, today they are no more... Many of them have fallen back to worldliness.'

He added: *'Pray also for people to be able to really forgive because, if things like this happen, if you don't forgive there will be no peace. Pray that we will have peace again.'*



Please help families of martyrs around the world

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

Your gift could:

- Support trauma-healing workshops
- Provide food and other essentials for survivors of attacks
- Provide direct support to widows and orphans

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



HOW TO PRAY FOR NIGERIA

- Pray for an end to the violence against Christians that has ravaged northern Nigeria and beyond for many years
- Pray for protection for vulnerable communities and Release International partners who risk their lives to help the persecuted
- That the bereaved and traumatised would find healing and hope as they attend workshops held by our partners
- That corrupt officials in the Government and security forces would be rooted out
- That God would convict the terrorists of their sin and open their eyes to the truth of the gospel
- For success in raising awareness and prayer for Nigerian Christians in the church in the UK and Ireland



Pastors pay
the ultimate
price in
Burkina Faso

Militants killed Annette's husband but a Release International-supported project is helping to rebuild her life, writes John Lawson

Our recent appeal featured the story of Juliette, whose husband, Andre, a pastor, was shot dead in his church during a raid by militants on his village in the Centre Nord region of Burkina Faso in May 2023.

Sadly, her story is not an isolated one. On the same visit to Burkina Faso earlier this year in which I met Juliette, I spoke to another widow, 'Annette', whose testimony was even more heartbreaking.

Annette lived in northern Burkina Faso with her husband, a tailor and church youth leader, and their three-year-old son. She was 24 years old and into the advanced stages of pregnancy with their second child when their village was attacked by a large number of armed Islamic militants.

The group, which had ridden in on motorbikes, surrounded the church and told everyone to sit on the ground before entering the church and setting fire to the pulpit. They then told all the men to stand behind the church and the women to stay seated outside the front.

The next thing she heard was the sound of gunfire. The pastor, his son, her husband and three others had been shot dead. The militants then told them all to leave the area, warning that, should they not, the group would return and kill everyone, including the women and children.

Annette fled to a different town where her husband had family members and gave birth to their daughter nine days later. Her husband's family, however, blamed his death on her Christian faith. They tried to pressure her into marrying another family member, in accordance with Islamic tradition, and in so doing to become a Muslim, but she refused and fled again – this time to Ouagadougou, the capital.

There she went to a church and explained her problems to the pastor, who found her the small place to live where we visited her; a single room rented for 5,000 CFA (£7) a month.

'Now I see that I am not alone'

Annette used to weave traditional clothes and would like to do so again but needs more equipment.

Annette was heavily pregnant when her husband was killed by militants

However, thanks to the diligent work of our local partner in locating displaced widows such as Annette, Release International is now supporting a project to help them to rebuild their lives through initial assistance with housing and food. During this time they are given help to start making a living, usually building on their existing skills and experience, eg, weaving/tailoring, hairdressing, door-to-door selling or rearing poultry. Funding is provided for the necessary equipment and materials to get them started.

Their children are supported through school by our education project. In addition to this material support our partner visits them regularly, reading God's word, praying, and even weeping with them, and expressing Christian solidarity with them through their grief. Annette told us that she likes to read the Psalms because King David also passed through difficult times.

She said: 'Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters [in the UK]. May God give you strength in your daily Christian walk. Now I see that I am not alone.'

*Name changed to protect identity

HOW YOUR FINANCIAL SUPPORT HELPS MARTYRS' FAMILIES

A Release International-supported project in Burkina Faso is transforming the lives of martyrs' families by providing pastoral care, assistance with housing and food, help to make a living and support for children's education.

TO MAKE A GIFT TO HELP THE FAMILIES OF MARTYRS PLEASE USE THE RESPONSE CARD, CALL 01689 823491 OR GIVE ONLINE AT [RELEASEINTERNATIONAL.ORG](https://www.releaseinternational.org)

BOOK TOUR



Berhane Asmelash encouraged listeners to keep praying for Eritrea

'The importance of hope in Jesus'

Audience inspired by Christians' loving witness in the face of intense persecution

Challenging, informative and inspiring' was how one member of the audience described Dr Berhane Asmelash's account of his imprisonment for his faith.

Dr Asmelash, an Eritrean whose autobiography, *Brother, I Have Come To Arrest You*, was published by Release International this year, shared his inspiring testimony and answered questions at a special event held at Wilmington Community Church in Dartford in July, as part of a book tour around the UK.

Those who attended were struck by the accounts of loving, faithful witness from Dr Asmelash and his fellow believers to those around them – even in the face of severe persecution that included imprisonment, intimidation, torture and even the threat of execution.

Eritrea, a one-party state on the Horn of Africa, currently has hundreds of Christians imprisoned for their faith. Some have been incarcerated

for more than 20 years and, recently, entire families have been imprisoned, including children as young as two years old. None of these Christian brothers and sisters have had a trial or even been formally charged with a crime.

However, despite the dire situation in Eritrea, Dr Asmelash, who is a Release International partner, was able to offer a glimmer of hope for his country that, ironically, begins in the prison cells where Christians are unjustly held.

According to Dr Asmelash, there are signs of church growth in Eritrea that owes some of its momentum to Christian prisoners sharing the love of Jesus with non-believing detainees and guards, a number of whom have then turned to Christ. These converts then spread their newfound faith when they return home, either as their work shift ends or upon release.

In all these things, Dr Asmelash stressed the importance of continued prayer for Eritrea.

One attendee, Sandra, told us afterwards: *'I was glad to be part of this event. What I will remember most from Dr Asmelash's message is the importance of hope in Jesus. Thank you for a challenging, informative and uplifting evening.'*

Thank you to Wilmington Community Church for hosting the event and to all the other churches that have provided venues for the book tour this year.

Compelling read

Dr Asmelash's biography tells the story of his imprisonment in strife-torn Ethiopia in the 1980s and his subsequent work to support persecuted Christians in an independent Eritrea. It has been endorsed by Fiona Bruce, the former MP and vice-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, who said: *'This book needed to be written – and needs to be read.'*

'The world should know of the suffering and bravery of thousands of Eritreans, barbarically imprisoned, tortured, and killed – simply on account of their beliefs.'

'May this book compel all who read it to action – to stand with and support, in whatever way we each can, the many Christians in Eritrea today who suffer simply because of their faith in Jesus Christ.'

• **Brother, I Have Come to Arrest You (priced £10 including p&p) is available on our website estore (releaseinternational.org) or by calling 01689 823491.**

BOOK TOUR

Berhane Asmelash will be visiting churches in two more regions this autumn to promote his book, sign copies and share his story:

**North & Midlands
Wed Oct 16 – Wed Oct 23**

**Wales & West
Wed Nov 20 – Wed Nov 27**

Check our events page www.releaseinternational.org/events for venue details.



Bringing life to the graveyard of empires

Radio is key to strengthening secret believers as well as reaching the lost, a Building One Body partner tells Kenneth Harrod

How do you take the gospel to one of the most inhospitable places in the world – a country now dominated by a militant Islamist group? One answer to that question is by radio.

Afghanistan has been described as the ‘graveyard of empires’, due to various failed attempts down the centuries by foreign military powers to conquer this landlocked mountainous country. In recent years the Islamist group the Taliban has taken control.

Life for the small number of Christians in the country was difficult enough before the Taliban regained control in the summer of 2021 but it has become worse since then.

‘Abraham*, who works for a Release International partner in the region, said, *‘[Before the Taliban] it was bad. But the Government gave people a chance. Some were able to declare their faith. It’s not in the news but there were around 10,000 believers who were able to declare themselves as Christians. When the Taliban came they had to flee Afghanistan [because they were known by the authorities].’*

Some of those who had to leave now work with Abraham in his gospel ministry. *‘One couple joined my team. The Taliban found out about their faith and came to arrest the man. He wasn’t at home but saw their car coming. They phoned him and said, “We want to know more about you.” As they said this he could see them sitting in their car*

and there were police cars behind. So instead of going home he went over the mountain and made arrangements to leave the country. Later we helped him to bring out his wife and child.’

Our partner organisation’s work involves making Christian radio programmes. *‘This media is the best way to share the gospel,’ said Abraham, ‘especially in the rural areas, as radio is the best way to find things out. People in rural areas don’t have TV or smart phones. They are keen to have a radio: it’s one of their best sources of information.’*

As the work has expanded several websites have been set up, for those who do have access to the internet: one hosts the radio programmes; one provides Scripture; another features video, including Christian films that have been dubbed; another makes books available for free download. Response to the radio programmes



with them. Outwardly they have to look like Muslims; even though inside they have Christ in them. Some have said to me, “When we die our bodies are going to be in a Muslim graveyard, but our spirits are going to be with Jesus.”

The programmes our partner make aim to address both evangelism and the discipling of believers. A team of people are available to follow up calls that are made. *‘People are sometimes afraid to make calls because they think they are being listened to and monitored. And yet the calls are coming in,’* said Abraham.

In his book *Tortured for Christ* Richard Wurmbrand wrote about one of the great challenges of gospel ministry in restricted countries: namely, that the joy of bringing someone to Christ was always mixed with the feeling that there might be a great price to be paid. Abraham knows this feeling.

‘It’s like the parable of someone who found a pearl and to get that pearl the person was ready to sell everything. The life we have in Jesus – even if we sell everything – is much more worth it. That’s how I see it. We as Christians have to follow the same pattern as the early church. If we just play safe we cannot take the gospel to the world. We have to take a risk and, at the same time, new believers have to take a risk. But if you value the gospel you will do it.’

Abraham was himself briefly imprisoned a number of years ago, falsely accused of killing a friend. He has also had to move house because of threats.

Currently one of the biggest needs our partner has is for more personnel in the team. *‘Pray for more labourers,’* said Abraham.

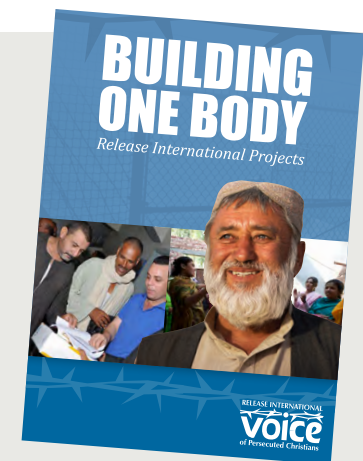
Despite all the challenges, Abraham draws great encouragement from the ministry, particularly every time one of his team is engaged in a follow-up call, be it with an inquirer or a believer. *‘People have tried everything in Afghanistan,’* he added. *‘Nothing has ever worked. Only the gospel is going to work. That is the only solution. And when I see and*

hear people accepting Jesus Christ that gives me both courage and encouragement.’

Please Pray:

- For Abraham and his team: for their security, and particularly for wisdom when they respond to enquirers
- For more Afghan language-speaking Christians to join the team
- That many more Afghans will hear the gospel through the radio programmes and come to faith in Christ

* Name changed to protect identity



Building One Body

Building One Body is a programme for churches who want to focus their prayers and their financial giving on a particular piece of work Release International is involved in. We have selected six of the many projects we support from around the world, one of which is the radio ministry into Afghanistan referred to in this article. To find out how your church can become involved, go to the **Building One Body** pack in the resources section of our website: (releaseinternational.org/resources-downloads). It explains what is involved and what we ask of churches who wish to partner with us in this way.

has been increasing, particularly since the Taliban regained control of the country. *‘There are so many restrictions. People face so many difficulties and are looking for hope,’* said Abraham. Since 2021 the radio programmes have elicited response calls averaging around 500 a month. In the first six months of this year our partner received more than 5,700 calls from inquirers.

‘When we die our bodies are going to be in a Muslim graveyard, but our spirits are going to be with Jesus’

However, to come to faith in Christ in Afghanistan is to risk all. *‘They live a changed life there but they can’t openly announce their faith. They will look for like-minded people to share their faith*



A special time of intercession

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

This year IDOP falls on November 3, although churches that regularly mark the event will sometimes choose another Sunday in the month.

There are three ways you could become actively involved this year:

First, Release International is taking part in an online event on the day. We will join friends from the Evangelical Alliance, Open Doors and CSW in a live online-streamed event at 7.30pm. We will present a short film from one of the countries we are actively involved in and there will be times for people watching to pray.

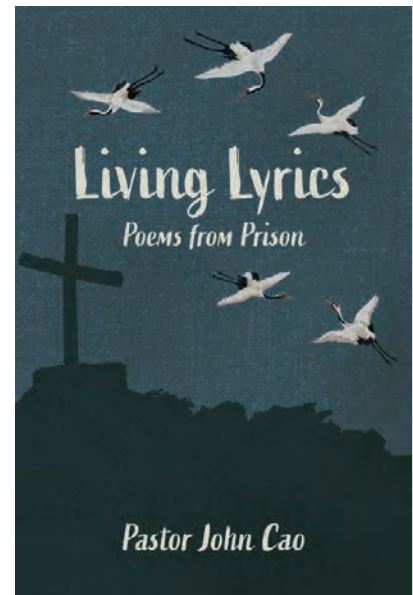
If your church does not have a regular evening service you could consider inviting friends round to watch the online presentation. If you do have an evening service (and you have

the facility to view online events) you could ask your church's leaders whether it could be watched after, or as part of, the service.

Secondly, we have created a number of downloadable resources to support you, if you decide to mark IDOP in your church (at any point during November). These are available under the Get Involved section of our website, where there is a dedicated menu for IDOP each year (releaseinternational.org/idop).

Finally, you could invite a Release International regional speaker to your church on a Sunday in November to mark IDOP. See box below for their contact details.

• **Register to join the online event on the Evangelical Alliance website (eauk.org).**



Verse of the persecuted church

During his time in prison for his faith, Chinese pastor John Cao was denied all books including the Bible so he started composing his own poetry. His story of imprisonment was included in the previous edition of *Voice*.

A selection of John's poems was subsequently published in the US by our partner, ChinaAid, as *Living Lyrics: Poems from Prison*.

We have now had a limited number of copies produced for supporters of Release International in the UK. To order a copy (price £8 including P&P) call 01689 823491 or visit our website estore.



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

Christmas with the Gettys

Release International is partnering with leading hymn writers, Keith and Kristyn Getty, for their Belfast Christmas concerts, a major music event in Northern Ireland this December.

The two 'Home for Christmas' concerts will be held at the SSE Arena on Thursday, December 19, and Friday, December 20 at 7.30pm. Tickets are on sale now.

Due to very high demand, the Gettys added a second date to their schedule after selling out the first night. Tickets can be obtained from the SSE Arena website, www.ssearenaelfast.com.

The partnership with the Gettys – writers of a number of our most popular modern hymns – follows the highly successful *Sing!* event in Northern Ireland last summer, where Release International's ministry was showcased.

Release International CEO Paul Robinson will be speaking on both

nights, sharing about the ministry and encouraging Christians to love and care for those who suffer for Christ and the gospel around the world.

'Last year's event was a fabulous evening. We are very much looking forward to partnering with Keith and Kristyn again,' said Paul.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

Release International will again be looking for volunteers to help at the event, talking to concert-goers and sharing about the work of the ministry. All who do so will get a free ticket for the event. If you would like to find out more about how you can help us to promote the ministry, get in touch with us on info@releaseinternational.org.

We need about 30 volunteers – 15 for each concert. Please tell us which days you are free to volunteer and priority will be given to those who reply promptly.

Please also do pray that these events will result in many more Christians coming forward to support persecuted believers and the work of Release International.



New world prayer map

One great way of reminding your friends of Release International's ministry is to display one of our informative Prayer Maps in your church.

We have just revised the map, so even if you have seen and used one before, now would be a great time to get a new one and put it up on your church's mission board.

The colourful map, which is A2 in size, identifies countries along the lines of the interactive globe on our website: distinguishing between countries where we are actively supporting work to care for persecuted Christians, and countries where we regularly monitor the situation for Christians.

Brief summaries with prayer pointers feature around the map for all the countries we are active in.

The map also features brief notes on the four types of persecution Release International focuses on: those who suffer oppression and violence; those who are forced to flee; those who are imprisoned; and the families of those who are martyred.

You can order a copy for £2.50 from our website e-store: (<https://releaseinternational.org/product/world-prayer-map/>), or by contacting us on 01689 823491.

YOUR FEEDBACK MATTERS!

Completing this Online Supporter Survey will help us to serve persecuted Christians more effectively



We have just launched our Release International Supporter Survey 2024 and would really love to know your views about the ministry.

Please do take some time to complete the survey today!

What do we do well? What do we need to improve? How do you rate Voice magazine? Do you like our Hazaq coffee? Are our regional live events five star or not so good? What is your overall impression and rating of Release International?

We have put together a list of 35 key questions for you to answer. It is very easy to complete online –

simply follow this link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/Release2024> or use the QR code (above).

The survey takes around 20 minutes. The last time we put together a questionnaire was in 2019, so we want to understand how our supporters' views may have changed since then.

The survey will remain open until November 30. If you have any problems with the online version, simply download a PDF file, fill it in and return to Freepost Release International.

Thank you for taking part. We really do value and appreciate your responses.

Recycle this magazine: share it with a friend!





Success prompts more dates for 'shocking' drama

Following the overwhelmingly positive reception of its play, *If Prison Walls Could Speak*, Artless Theatre Company has added fresh dates to its touring programme for the rest of this year.

Described by *Premier Christianity Magazine* as 'bold, innovative and shocking to the core', the one-man drama movingly portrays the story of Release International's associate ministry worker Petr Jasek (pictured), who was imprisoned in Sudan in 2015 because of his Christian work.



'The fact that more and more churches want to host this production is testament to how inspiring Petr's story is and how well-produced the drama is,' said Paul Robinson, Release International chief executive. *'Most of all, though, this true story shows us that God is still in charge and working out His purposes even when our situations are, in human terms, the worst they can be.'*

Following performances in the North of England in the summer, including a late-night showing at the Cedarwood Festival in North Yorkshire, we are pleased to announce the following dates:

West of England and Wales

Friday 20th September: Highbury Congregational, CHELTENHAM, GL52 6DT

Sunday 22nd September: Tabernacle Church Penarth, CARDIFF, CF64 1EN

Monday 23rd September: Bath Abbey, BATH, BA1 1LT

Tuesday 24th September: St Nicholas, Uphill Road South, WESTON-SUPER-MARE, BS23 4SD

Thursday 26th September: Plymouth Methodist Central Hall, PLYMOUTH, PL1 1BA

Scotland

Thursday 3rd October: Charlotte Chapel, EDINBURGH, EH2 4RT

Friday 4th October: Buckie Baptist Church, BUCKIE, AB56 1JN

Saturday 5th October: Aberdeen Christian Fellowship, ABERDEEN, AB10 6SR

Sunday 6th October: Burnside Blairbeth Church, GLASGOW, G73 5BX

South of England

Friday 18th October: Wilmington Community Church, DARTFORD, DA2 7AQ

Saturday 19th October: Christ Church, BANSTEAD, SM7 2NZ

Sunday 20th October: Holy Trinity, WALLINGTON, SM6 8BL

Tuesday 22nd October: Widford Parish Church, CHELMSFORD, CM1 2TS

Friday 8th November: Highgate International Church, LONDON, N6 5AU

Further dates may still be secured in each region. Please check our website events page www.releaseinternational.org/events for further details and information on how to book tickets.



Mother and son hit the heights

A big thank you to supporter Barbara and her son Joseph (above) who raised more than £370 to help persecuted Christians by completing the Peak District Ultra Challenge 2024 over two days in July.

'My family is thankful for the privilege to run for our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world,' she said.

If you enjoy walking, trekking or running, why not take part in one of the Ultra Challenge® series of treks and runs while at the same time raising sponsorship for Release International's work?

You may be a walker and new to endurance events, a seasoned trekker, or perhaps a marathon runner looking to up the distance but whatever your pace, experience or age there are many fantastic events to choose from of varying distances from 10km to 100km. You will be fully supported along the way and can take part as an individual or with others as a team.

Whether it's setting out in stunning coastal scenery, along a historic towpath or along trails in England's wonderful countryside, your challenge will test you on an unforgettable journey. Most will walk at a pace that suits them, many will jog parts and some will run the whole course!

'I would thoroughly recommend taking on one of these challenges,' said Paul Robinson, Release International CEO. *'It's a great way to test yourself, make new friends while all the time raising funds to help our persecuted family.'*

Visit www.ultrachallenge.com for the full list of challenges and how to sign up.



Simple way to show how much you care

Your regular support enables our partners to provide prayerful, pastoral and practical help to persecuted Christians in around 30 countries.

Regular gifts such as through Direct Debits mean it is so much easier for us and our partners to plan that support, whether it's practical help such as providing food or shelter for Christians forced to flee, help for the families of those who have been imprisoned for their faith and so are unable to provide for their spouse

and children, or counselling for those who have suffered horrific trauma as a result of losing loved ones to violence.

Knowing that the funds are available to meet the needs of their persecuted brothers and sisters is also one less consideration for our partners at a time when they themselves can be challenged by the demands of their ministry.

'Thank you to everyone who gives to

help our persecuted family,' said Paul Robinson, Release International chief executive. *'Regular giving particularly is very much appreciated. The more we know how much will be available the more we know how much we have to fund the needs of our persecuted brothers and sisters.'*

- 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.

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 Income Tax at the higher or additional rate and want to receive the additional tax relief due to you, you must include all 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!

Yes, I want to partner with Release International

Instruction to your Bank or Building Society to make gifts by Direct Debit

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.

Please Pay Release International Direct Debits from the account detailed in this instruction subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit Guarantee. I understand that this instruction may remain with Release International and, if so, details will be passed electronically to my Bank/Building Society.

Amount: £ Monthly Quarterly Annually

Make each payment on the 1st or 15th of the month, beginning on

These gifts are to be used wherever they are most needed.

Name of account holder

Account number Sort code

Name of your Bank/Building Society

Date Signed

I confirm that I am the account holder and am the only person required to authorise this Direct Debit.

The Direct Debit Guarantee • This Guarantee is offered by all banks and building societies that accept instructions to pay Direct Debits. • If there are any changes to the amount, date or frequency of your Direct Debit, Release International will notify you 3 working days in advance of your account being debited or as otherwise agreed. • If you request Release International to collect a payment, you are entitled to a full and immediate refund of the amount paid from your Bank or Building Society. • If an error is made in the payment of your Direct Debit, by Release International or your Bank or Building Society, asks you to. • You can cancel a Direct Debit at any time by simply contacting your Bank or Building Society. Written confirmation may be required. Please also notify Release International.

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.

THE WORD

What does comfort really look like for those who have lost loved ones? asks Kenneth Harrod

Encouraging with the hope of the gospel

When a Christian is martyred our thoughts – and prayers – naturally turn to those who are left behind: a spouse, children, other family and Christian friends.

Depending on the circumstances, our concern and response may be two-fold. First, there may be a desperate need to provide for survivors in practical ways, particularly if they have had to flee in the face of violent attacks. This is what prompts our *giving*. Secondly, we imagine their shock, grief and the pain of loss – and we pray. We pray, perhaps, that God would ‘comfort’ them.

But what does that mean?

When we turn to the Bible one interesting thing to note is that the New Testament word sometimes translated as ‘comfort’ (depending on which version you read) is the same word that is elsewhere translated as ‘encouragement’.

Our Western, increasingly secular, godless culture may not always put those two concepts together. For some, to ‘comfort’ may simply suggest ‘putting an arm round’, ‘being a shoulder to cry on’, ‘being there for them’, and so on. To ‘encourage’, on the other hand, sounds far more active: words that urge someone to do something, or to adopt a particular attitude.

However, the New Testament writers, with God at the centre of all they proclaim and teach, see things differently. To ‘comfort’ and

to ‘encourage’ are far more closely related. And what binds these two together is the *Christian hope*. In other words, we comfort – and we encourage – suffering Christians by pointing them to the sure and certain hope we have, in and through Jesus Christ.

Time and again we see the New Testament writers doing this. In one of his earliest letters, the Apostle Paul writes to Christians in Thessalonica who were troubled by the deaths of fellow Christians (whether this was by martyrdom or through natural causes is not the issue). His response is to tell them that Christians don’t grieve ‘as others do who have no hope’ (1 Thess 4:13) – which is not the same as saying Christians don’t grieve at all: we do! However, he then reminds them of Jesus’ resurrection and the fact that one day believers will be with the Lord. ‘Therefore,’ he concludes, ‘comfort/encourage (again, depending

on which translation you use) one another with these words’ (1 Thess 4:18).

This is not to imply indifference to present, physical need. As we have already noted, compassion leads to giving that will meet those needs. Rather, it is the desire that those who have most acutely experienced the world’s evil would be people who keep their eyes fixed on Jesus (Heb 12:2). This ‘encouraging’ will, in the first instance, be the task of the pastors and partners Release International supports around the world.

In Romans 15 Paul speaks of building up the weak ‘through the encouragement of the Scriptures’, which engenders hope. His prayer is then, ‘*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope*’ (Romans 15:13).

INSPIRING FAITH



‘If you are not willing to die for what is in the Bible, you should not give money for Bibles. Because if you give, we will smuggle more Bibles. And if we smuggle more Bibles, there will be more martyrs’

Pastor Richard Wurmbbrand 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
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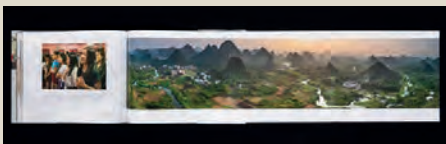


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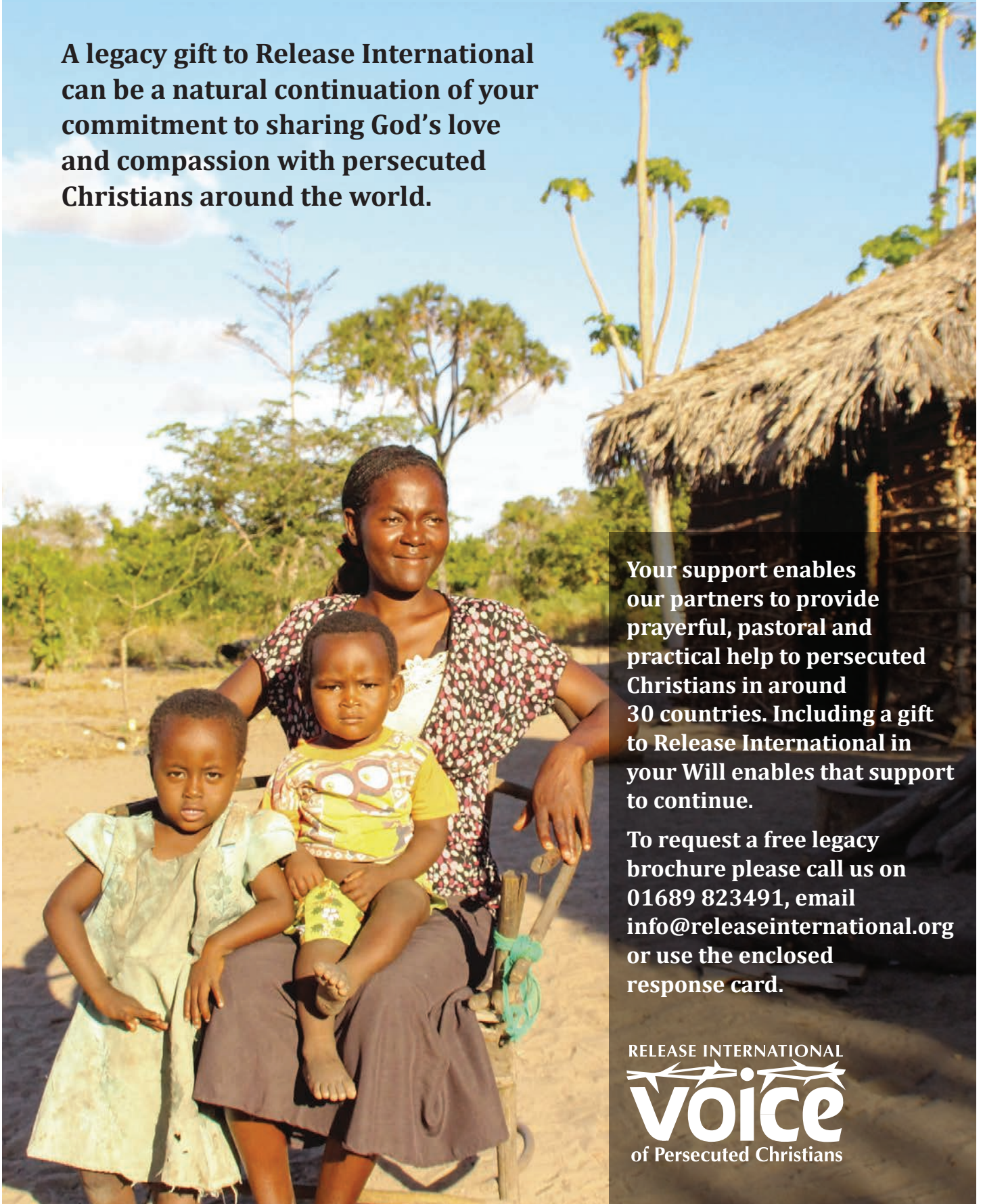
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voice
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Oct– Dec 2024



OCTOBER 2024

Heavenly Father,

Give me a heart like

Nehemiah's (Nehemiah 1:4)

so that when I learn of the

persecution of my brothers

and sisters I respond with

Your compassion, praying for

their strength, comfort and

restoration. Help me also to

pray for the work of rebuilding

your kingdom where it is

opposed by violent hatred.

In Jesus' name.

Amen

NIGERIA

TUESDAY 1: Rev Gideon Dawell's wife and five children were killed in an attack by Fulani militants on Christmas Eve last year (see *Voice*, pages 6-13). Pray that this dear pastor who has been traumatised by their deaths will know God's peace, comfort and hope.

WEDNESDAY 2: Thank God that, following a time of doubting as a result of the killing of his family, Rev Gideon's faith has been renewed and he has been able to forgive those responsible. Pray that the perpetrators would come to repentance and faith.

THURSDAY 3: Our partner, Stefanos Foundation, was

able to give practical support to Gideon and his community in Plateau state, following the attack (see previous days). Thank God for this love in action.

FRIDAY 4: Eighteen Christians were reportedly killed in a late-night attack on Mbacher village, a predominantly Christian community in the central Benue state's Katsina-Ala County, by armed Fulani militants in July. Please pray for the traumatised survivors.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
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of Persecuted Christians

SATURDAY 5: Pray for Esther Ibrahim, who lost sons and wider family members in an attack by bandits in 2022. Thank God that she has been helped by the trauma counselling provided by our partner, Stefanos Foundation. See *Voice*, pages 6-13.

SUNDAY 6: Pray for Gushe Philemon who has struggled in his faith after the killing of his father, a pastor. Pray that he would grow strong in his faith again and know the comfort and love of God. See *Voice*, pages 6-13.

MONDAY 7: Pray for all those who have been displaced by recent Jihadist attacks. As well as carrying severe trauma, many have lost their homes and possessions and are now living in camps for the displaced.

NORTH KOREA

TUESDAY 8: Lift to God in prayer every North Korean who has received a digital Bible. Citizens discovered with Scripture face severe punishment. Pray that underground believers would be strengthened in their faith as they read God's word.

WEDNESDAY 9: Pray for protection, wisdom and boldness for Christians reaching out to North Korean workers in other countries. Such interactions are dangerous both for believers and those they approach.

THURSDAY 10: Pray for the security of believers whose

lives are constantly at risk as they engage in discreet discipleship and evangelism activities.

FRIDAY 11: Pastor Kim Kuk-Gi was arrested in 2014 and charged with espionage and spreading 'religious propaganda' from an 'underground church'. He was sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour. Pray that God would sustain his faith and give him peace, joy and hope.

SATURDAY 12: Pastor Zhang Wen Shi is an ethnically Korean-Chinese citizen who ministered to Koreans crossing the border to trade before returning home. He was kidnapped from China in 2014 and sent to a North Korean prison to serve a 15-year sentence. Pray for his release and thank God for all the North Koreans who have come to Christ through his ministry.

SUNDAY 13: Pray for the safety of those living in North Korea who listen to gospel radio broadcasts produced by our partners.

MONDAY 14: Pray for North Korean defectors who are participating in Bible translation through our partner's project. On a weekly basis they meet new defectors in South Korea. Please pray for these North Koreans as they settle into a new culture and encounter God through his word.

PAKISTAN

TUESDAY 15: Pray for our partners and their families who have been forced to relocate this year because of security issues related to their ministry. Pray

that they will settle into their new homes and be encouraged as they continue to serve God.

WEDNESDAY 16: Pray for God's wisdom as our partners respond to many persecution and discrimination issues on a daily basis.

THURSDAY 17: Pray for senior church leaders in Pakistan as they speak to the Government about issues of freedom of religion, and especially the misused blasphemy laws. Pray that officials would take the necessary action to protect minority groups in Pakistan.

FRIDAY 18: Pray that God would open the eyes of extremists in Pakistan to be able to recognise His love in Christ.

SATURDAY 19: Pray for unity among the churches in Pakistan as they stand together to represent Christ and seek to be light in the darkness.

SUNDAY 20: Pray for three Christian prisoners who have each received the death sentence, and for their families, whom our partners are supporting. May they be comforted, encouraged to continue in their faith and helped with all the legal processes.

MONDAY 21: Pray for several families from Pakistan who are currently living in a nearby country. The families, who are being supported by Release International, had to flee because of hostility and continuing risks from radicals. Pray that God would provide a permanent place for them to settle.



Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel is one of six Christians to have been imprisoned for more than 20 years

ERITREA

TUESDAY 22: Earlier this year two pastors were arrested, along with their wives and children – the youngest of whom is two. Pray that these two families would be released and that God would guard their spiritual, physical and emotional wellbeing.

WEDNESDAY 23: Pray for all those working secretly in the underground church as they minister under significant pressure, especially the fear of arrest.

THURSDAY 24: Pray that those in leadership in the Eritrean church would receive wisdom, protection and courage as they pastor believers and share the gospel.

FRIDAY 25: There is a desperate need to support practically hundreds of prisoners' families. Please pray that the Lord would provide the financial resources for this vital work.

SATURDAY 26: Pray for the following prisoners who have all been behind bars for more than 20 years, and for their families: Kiflu Gebremeskel, Futsum Gebrenegus, Million Gebreselasie, Tekleab Menghisteab, Haile Naizghe and Rev G. Gebregiorsis.

SUNDAY 27: Pray for Kidane Weldou and Mussie Ezaz, along with their families. The two men have been prisoners since 2005 and 2007 respectively.

MONDAY 28: Thank the Lord for local missionaries in Eritrea and pray for opportunities, protection and fruitful ministries.

ETHIOPIA

TUESDAY 29: Pray against efforts to turn Ethiopia into an Islamic state. Lift up to God the pastors and evangelists who are experiencing severe persecution in Muslim-majority areas of the country.

WEDNESDAY 30: Pray that new believers from Muslim backgrounds would become mature in their faith and their understanding of the Bible. Thank God for the significant number of churches that have been planted in the past six months.

THURSDAY 31: Pray that the staff of a mission school supported by Release International would be able to continue to train, equip and inspire new believers to be ministers of Christ. Pray too for the necessary resources to fund the school in a country that is experiencing inflation of more than 35 per cent.

NOVEMBER 2024

CENTRAL ASIA

FRIDAY 1: In Turkmenistan almost every foreign Christian has been expelled and several national pastors have been exiled, beaten, heavily fined or imprisoned. Pray for Christians there to stand firm and for those outside the country to pray and speak up against these hostile actions.

SATURDAY 2: Pray for the family of pastor 'Batyr', who died earlier this year. He was a key leader among the small, isolated groups of believers in Turkmenistan. Pray that God would raise up more faithful leaders throughout the region.

SUNDAY 3: Give thanks for the faithfulness of Pastor 'Orif' from Uzbekistan, who is serving God with commitment there and also helping with the distribution of funds to believers in Turkmenistan.

MONDAY 4: Thank God for our partner, 'Pavel', who faithfully and tirelessly works to encourage Christians throughout the whole of Central Asia. May he know the strength and encouragement of the Lord as he keeps giving of himself to help persecuted believers.

TUESDAY 5: The testimony of Pastor 'Amir' includes deportation, arrest and opposition. Thank God that he has not given up but is still actively preaching the gospel and making disciples in Kazakhstan.

WEDNESDAY 6: Pray for the churches in Kazakhstan where

there is relative freedom. May they not become comfortable but remain courageous in their gospel witness.

THURSDAY 7: Pray for churches in Kazakhstan that have been repeatedly denied registration and so are technically illegal; that despite this opposition, they would be strengthened, encouraged and ultimately granted registration.

CHINA

FRIDAY 8: Pray that the family of the late Chinese lawyer Li Baiguang, who died in suspicious circumstances six year ago, would know God's peace and healing of their grief as well as freedom from government pressure.

SATURDAY 9: Pastor John Cao was released from prison in March after serving a seven-year sentence. During his imprisonment God strengthened John's faith and gave him the opportunity to share the gospel with other prisoners. Give thanks for John's release and pray for the full recovery of his civil rights and citizenship so he can travel freely.

SUNDAY 10: Pastors of unregistered churches in China are increasingly being arrested on spurious charges of fraud simply for accepting payment for their work. Pray against this new oppressive and unjust tactic.

MONDAY 11: Pray for Pastor Hao Zhiwei who was arrested in July 2019. She

was charged with fraud for preaching the gospel without approval from the state-sanctioned church and sentenced to eight years in prison. Her case may have been the first of its kind in China.

TUESDAY 12: Pray for Elder Zhang Chunlei of Guiyang Renai Reformed Church whose wife recently discovered that he has developed cirrhosis of the liver while in prison. Zhang was one of the first church leaders to sign Pastor Wang Yi's 'Declaration for the Sake of the Christian Faith' and was detained in March 2021 following a raid on his church. He was later charged on suspicion of 'inciting subversion of state power' and 'fraud'.

WEDNESDAY 13: Pray for Hunan street evangelist Chen Wensheng who was

recently sentenced to one year and seven months in prison for 'organising and funding illegal gatherings'. Give thanks for his commitment to sharing the gospel and pray that he would know God's comfort and strength in prison.

THURSDAY 14: Children in China are not permitted to attend any church or profess faith in Christ. Pray that Christian families will have the resources, conviction and encouragement they need to continue to nurture their children in the faith.

SUDAN

FRIDAY 15: Sudan has experienced more than 50 years of Islamisation including the destruction of numerous churches and the imprisonment of Christians. The Government seeks to eradicate Christians and ethnically African people



Li Baiguang died in suspicious circumstances

around its border with South Sudan. Pray for an end to this repression.

SATURDAY 16: Pray that the 5 per cent of the Sudan population that is Christian would stay strong in the face of intimidation, arrest, imprisonment and other forms of persecution. Pray that many Sudanese Muslims would come to know Christ.

SUNDAY 17: Bibles and Christian literature have become very scarce in Sudan. Pray for our partner organisation which is seeking to address this by supplying Bibles in various formats and languages.

MONDAY 18: Pray for the continuing distribution of essential practical support for the Christians who have been displaced and are in the Nuba Mountains region of South Kordofan state.

TUESDAY 19: Pray that those who have converted to Christianity would experience God's peace in whatever circumstances they are living.

WEDNESDAY 20: Pray for the protection of front-line workers (nationals and foreigners), as well as for their boldness in proclaiming the gospel and for provision of their spiritual and practical needs.

THURSDAY 21: Praise God for the large numbers among the Sudanese diaspora who have come to Christ in neighbouring countries. Pray for their protection and that they will stand strong as new

believers and share their faith with their families and wider community.

BHUTAN

FRIDAY 22: Please pray for greater religious freedom in Bhutan. Christian converts can be exposed to harsh treatment from their family and local community, including losing their jobs or being disinherited. Bhutanese culture is very communal and the protection of family is paramount, so being ostracised by relatives has a significant impact on a convert's life.

SATURDAY 23: Pray for the endurance of believers in Bhutan who are often ostracised, denied jobs and falsely accused.

SUNDAY 24: There are 760,000 people in Bhutan, more than 99 per cent of whom are considered unreached by the gospel. Pray that the good news would be proclaimed throughout the nation and God would draw many to Himself from the various people groups.

MONDAY 25: Daily life in Bhutan is influenced by the idea of *karma*, leading people to perform rituals and rites in the hope of reaching *nirvana*. This ideology creates a sense of fear. Pray that those who have been set free from this belief would know God's protection as they share the truth of the gospel with others.

TUESDAY 26: Many young people leave Bhutan in search of a better life, further education and job prospects. Pray that they would encounter Christ, but also then return to their nation with a strong faith that would enable them to withstand any persecution.

WEDNESDAY 27: Pray for our partner in Bhutan who, with his wife and children, is faithfully serving Christ. May they be deeply encouraged as they seek to equip and strengthen the churches throughout the nation.

THURSDAY 28: Bhutan is a difficult place in which to lead a church, with many pressures from the Government and difficult pastoral situations to handle amid persecution. Pray for our partner as he seeks to encourage pastors throughout Bhutan.

PHILIPPINES

FRIDAY 29: Praise God for those who are turning to Christ and boldly sharing the gospel with their friends, family and wider community. Pray they would have wisdom and protection as they do so.

SATURDAY 30: Pray for former Muslims who are unable to stay in their family and community because of death threats. Our partners are seeking to buy land for a safe house in which new believers can be discipled and trained in evangelism and mission in a secure environment.

DECEMBER 2024

LAOS

SUNDAY 1: Pray for Lao Christians who have had their homes and churches destroyed. In the space of two months, at least 10 families reportedly had their properties targeted. Pray that God would provide for their needs, and also for those who are ministering to them.

MONDAY 2: Praise God that the number of Christians in Laos is growing significantly. Pray that He will protect His people and use them for His glory and the expansion of His kingdom.

TUESDAY 3: Pray for 'Mr Om', who is from the Khmu ethnic group. He is married with three children but has recently been rejected by his wider family because of his faith in Christ. He has been evicted from the family home and his farmland has been taken from him. Pray that God would continue to provide for 'Mr Om' and his immediate family.

WEDNESDAY 4: 'Thrang' is a 34-year-old Khmu Christian living in Udomxai province. Despite being expelled from his village for his faith, he has continued boldly to witness and has seen many families accept Christ. There is much hostility towards Thrang; his tractor has been damaged, while all of his crops have been destroyed and his cows poisoned. Pray for him as he

seeks to earn a living and proclaim Christ.

THURSDAY 5: Pray for Bounchan and his family. He was released in 2012 after a 14-year prison sentence. Thank God that our partner is able to support him with ongoing care, basic living expenses and medical provision needs.

FRIDAY 6: Many Christian leaders in Laos face constant threats and persecution. Our partner is providing opportunities for them to meet with other Christian leaders in neighbouring countries to be encouraged and equipped. Pray these would be fruitful occasions.

SATURDAY 7: Pray for the family and congregation of pastor Thongkham Philavanh (pictured) who was killed by gunmen in northwestern Laos in July. Thongkham, a tribal Khmu leader who was aged 40, was the provincial head of the Lao Evangelical Church.



Thongkham Philavanh is survived by his wife (pictured with him) and children

IRAN

SUNDAY 8: Pray that Iran's new President, Masoud Pezeshkian, will govern wisely, in the interests of all Iranians, and have the courage to undertake reform in the area of religious and human rights.

MONDAY 9: Pray for the underground church in Iran, which is one of the world's fastest growing. Pray for wisdom and sound teaching for its leaders and protection from those who would wish it harm.

TUESDAY 10: Pray for the many Christians who have had to flee Iran and are living in Turkey or other neighbouring countries, often without legal status or civic rights.

WEDNESDAY 11: Pray for all those who minister into Iran using satellite-TV and online platforms. May God bless their efforts and nourish the seeds of faith they have planted within Iran.

THURSDAY 12: Pray for our three partner organisations who minister with and to Iranians both inside and outside the country. Ask God to provide the resources they need.

FRIDAY 13: Pray for Pastor Anooshavan Avedian and the many other Christian prisoners of faith held in Iranian jails. Pray for God's strength and protection for them and their families as



Pray that Algerian Protestant churches that have been closed will be allowed to reopen

they undergo this ordeal – and for their release.

SATURDAY 14: Pray for all those working to translate, produce and distribute Bibles and audio resources, not only in Farsi but also Iran's many other languages, so that God's word can be read, understood and shared by all.

ALGERIA

SUNDAY 15: Pray for the regularisation of the status of the Protestant church in Algeria. All the paperwork has been submitted but no response received yet. Pray that the 43 Protestant

churches the Government has closed will be allowed to re-open.

MONDAY 16: Pray for cancellation of the convictions of those who have been found guilty by local judges simply for practising their faith. Most of these cases are now with the Supreme Court of Algeria. Pray that this judicial body hears these appeals soon and finds in their favour.

TUESDAY 17: Pray for the physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing of church leaders and other believers who, along with their family

members, have suffered health problems as a result of the long and unjust judicial proceedings they have had to endure.

WEDNESDAY 18: Pray for an end to the harassment that Algerian Christians face from the security services when meeting officials. Many are intimidated at ports and airports every time they leave or return to the country.

THURSDAY 19: Pray for the health of the leaders of the Christian community. Pray for guidance and protection for those who seek other ways to worship and have fellowship, following the closure of 43 of Algeria's 44 Protestant churches.

FRIDAY 20: Please pray for authorisation to import Bibles, through the Bible Society of Algeria. Pray particularly that a consignment of Bibles which has been impounded for more than two years would be released.

SATURDAY 21: Ask God to meet the practical needs of those who have been persecuted for their faith. Christians are not immune from the effects of unemployment and the increased cost of living.

INDONESIA

SUNDAY 22: Pray that converts to Christianity will be emboldened to share their new-found faith with their neighbours. The risk of

doing so varies throughout the country, so discernment is required.

MONDAY 23: Remember in prayer the families of six believers who were brutally martyred in 2022, as the anniversary of their deaths at Christmas approaches. Pray for the bereaved who are still mourning their loss.

TUESDAY 24: Pray that the recent incident of disruption at a house church in Surabaya does not become a catalyst for further intimidation of local believers. A similar incident was reported to have taken place in the city in March.

WEDNESDAY 25: As we celebrate the birth of our Saviour, let's remember the worldwide Body of Christ in places that are hostile to the gospel such as in Indonesia.

THURSDAY 26: Pray for wisdom and strength to be given to church leaders, especially those who stream services online. Recently, a radical group filed 'complaints of blasphemy' towards a pastor in Jakarta for 'insulting' comments he is

reported to have made during a Sunday service.

FRIDAY 27: Pray for the large numbers of men and women who have recently been baptised in Indonesia. Pray that their faith will remain strong even if persecution comes.

SATURDAY 28: Remember the attendees at a Release International-supported mission school as they prepare for study and field work throughout the many islands of Indonesia.

INDIA

SUNDAY 29: Pray for members of a house church in the Nawada area of Uttarakhand state's Dehradun district, which was attacked by a mob of about 150 Hindu radicals in July. Some of the congregation were beaten while mobile phones were taken and musical instruments broken.

MONDAY 30: The pastor of a house church in northern India (see previous day) said a church member who helped register the case by identifying the assailants lost a job he had held at a factory

for 16 years, as the owner was an ardent supporter of the militant Hindu RSS organisation. Owners of local shops now refuse to sell groceries and other essentials to church members, he added. Church services are currently held online.

TUESDAY 31: Pray for comfort and strength for pastor Sushil Kumar and his wife, Ravita Devi, whose son, Nilesh, was tortured and strangled to death by extremists in the village of Satpura in the Arwal district of the northern Bihar state earlier this year.

Lord Jesus

*Just and true are Your ways,
King of the nations (Rev 15:3).
I pray for all Your people who
have been traumatised by
the martyrdom of their loved
ones. Give them hope and
courage to face the future.*

*And dear Saviour, embolden
me to stand up for Your truth,
to share the gospel with love
just as Your faithful saints
have been willing to do, no
matter what the cost.*

*Your kingdom come, Your will
be done.*

Amen

ChinaAid; Christian Daily International-Morning Star News; Release International partners and contacts; Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) Korea; 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.

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