

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

APR-JUN 2025

voice

of Persecuted Christians

HELPING OPPRESSED CHRISTIANS

Fiery trials In Laos

*How pastors are
responding to suffering*

Growing fear in Malaysia

*Rise in extremism puts
pressure on church*

Inspiring the next generation

*The unstoppable
Korean granny*

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



Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

**Standing
for Christ
wherever
we are**

As we approach Easter we are reminded of what it cost Jesus to bring about our salvation but we can easily forget his instruction to take up our own cross to follow him (Matt 16:24).

For our brothers and sisters in many countries around the world ignoring Jesus's words is not an option as they are faced daily with the impact of following the Lord: physical abuse, family and societal rejection, false accusations, losing one's home, torture and even death. They know what he meant: the simple act of proclaiming Christ can invite one's own death sentence. Yet they do not waver.

In this edition of *Voice*, be encouraged as you read about how oppressed pastors in Laos view trials and persecution (see pages 6-11).

On page 12, Stephen McIlroy assesses how the growth in extremism in Malaysia is putting more pressure on the church and causing fear among Christians. It is a call for us to pray that our brothers and sisters in that nation will stand firm in the faith.

If you ever needed proof of the life-changing power of the gospel then turn to page 15 to find out how our partner is training up believers who have suffered horrific trauma to be evangelists to the very people who caused their pain.

On page 16 Afghan Christians recount their stories of fleeing their homeland and finding

sanctuary thousands of miles away in South America. There they have found a home; and we thank God with them for a safe place to live where their children can grow up in the faith without fear of being discovered.

Last but certainly not least, please take a few minutes to enjoy the powerful story of Mrs Lee (see page 18). I can't help but be inspired by this dynamic 96-year-old Korean lady who continues to proclaim Jesus to those around her. Oh that I will be doing the same at her age!

YOUNG FUNDRAISERS

A huge thanks to children at a church in Stockport who have raised £750 in sponsorship by memorising the books of the New Testament (see page 20). What an inspiration to people of all ages! They remind us that we can all play our part in helping God's persecuted followers no matter how young or old we are.

WHAT KIND OF LEGACY WILL YOU LEAVE?

Included with this magazine is a leaflet about legacies. Please do prayerfully consider how God may be prompting you to continue to support our ministry by leaving a gift to Release International in your will. We are so grateful to those people, often long-term supporters, who have left a bequest as their final action to help God's suffering people and to raise their voice.

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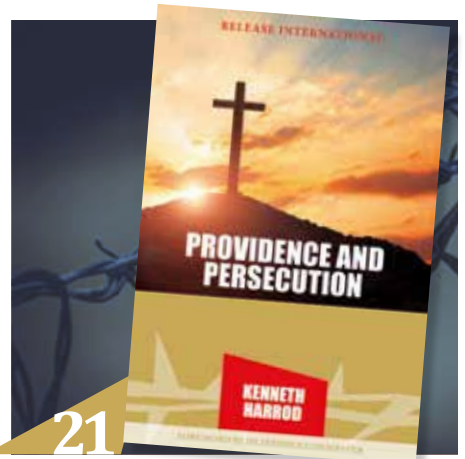
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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

voice

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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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FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR

Faith under fire

Egyptian converts freed

Two Christian converts from Islam who were locked in an Egyptian prison and held for three years without trial have been released, religious rights advocates have said.

Abdulbaqi Saeed Abdo and Nour Girgis were released in January. Both had been held in 'pre-trial detention' since 2021 on blasphemy charges.

Abdo, who is from Yemen and had UN refugee status because of persecution he suffered there, has fled to Canada where he has been reunited with his family. Human rights activists have not publicly released the location of Girgis, who still has charges against him.

Agents from Egypt's National Security Agency (NSA) raided Abdo's home in December 2021, seized three laptops and arrested him. The raid happened after he appeared on a Christian television channel to discuss the persecution of Christians in Yemen.

Egyptian authorities later identified Abdo as a member of a private Facebook group for converts from Islam and charged him with 'joining a terrorist group with knowledge of its purposes' and 'contempt of the Islamic religion'. Police also identified Girgis as a member of the alleged group and arrested him under the same charges.

Human rights advocates inside Egypt and abroad said the charges against the two Christians were dubious at best.

(Source: Morning Star News)



Iraqi Christians who are struggling just to get by need hope, says Rev Faiz Jirjees.

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Iraqi Christians struggle to make ends meet

Christians in Iraq have become second-class citizens, often struggling to provide for life's basic necessities, according to a Release International partner.

Rev Faiz Jirjees is based at St George's Church in Baghdad, a church that is currently supporting around 150 Christian families with basic food packages. Release International supports the ministry costs at St George's.

'Christians cannot get jobs that would meet their qualifications — just because they are Christians,' he said. 'Being a Christian is being "low" in Iraq today.'

Christianity has had a long tradition in Iraq. Prior to the first Gulf War Christians were a sizeable minority of Iraq's population and Christianity was generally tolerated under Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime.

It is estimated that there were more than 1.5 million believers in Iraq at the turn of the century. Twenty years later that number had shrunk to less than a quarter of that figure. In the chaotic years following the 2003 invasion and the subsequent rise of Islamic State and other Islamist militia many Christians either fled the country altogether or moved to Kurdistan, a region straddling the boundaries of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey.

'We don't really have freedom of religion,' Rev Faiz continued. Many Christians feel disappointed and oppressed. 'As a church we are aware of people's burdens and want to lift them up and give them hope.'

Rev Faiz asked that Christians in the UK pray for long-term peace and stability in Iraq and that the Government gives Iraqi Christians their full rights as citizens.

Sri Lankan church opposed by Buddhist monks

Members of the Way to the Comfort Ministry Church in Seethwaka, Sri Lanka, are facing continuing demands to cease all Christian activities in their village. On January 26 Buddhist monks approached the church leadership and insisted that the pastor stopped holding worship services, claiming that only Buddhist practices were permitted in the village. They further accused the pastor of forcibly converting people to Christianity and receiving foreign aid.

The next evening large stones were thrown at the church building, damaging the roof and nearly hitting the pastor's wife. In response to these threats, the Christians filed police reports, prompting the authorities to investigate the incident. As a result, the police ordered three Buddhist monks to meet with the church's pastor, his wife, some congregants and other local pastors. During the meeting, the authorities asked for a peaceful resolution, to which the monks agreed. However, one of the monks later told the pastor that they intended to pursue legal action.

(Source: National Christian Evangelical Alliance Sri Lanka)

Listen to our latest podcasts



CEO Paul Robinson: Unpacking the Persecution Trends Report

In this edition of Release International's Voice podcast we're speaking to Release International CEO, Paul Robinson. The annual *Persecution Trends Report* is the report of Release International's partners on the ground: their summary of what has been happening to Christians in their country. Listen as Paul highlights some of the countries mentioned in this year's report – and tells us how we can read and use it.

Lebanon: Cast out for Christ Lebanon is a country that has been besieged by problems in recent years. In this edition of the Voice Podcast we speak to our partner Naji who continues to minister to persecuted Christians in, and despite, the current difficulties.

Egypt: Rejected for Christ Coming to faith in Christ brings us the joy of a new family: the Body of Christ. But sometimes it means it can bring painful separation from our old family. In this edition of Release International's Voice podcast host Kenneth Harrod speaks to RI colleague Jack Norman about Christian life in Egypt.

Nigeria: Suffering with Christ Serving on the front-line, where Christians are suffering severe persecution, can be tough. In this edition of Release International's Voice podcast we speak to our Nigerian partner Mark Lipdo, who for several years has run the Stefanos Foundation, a ministry addressing the trauma that many Nigerian Christians experience.

Sign up to Release



Muskan has been abducted for a second time

Pakistani family fear for kidnapped daughter's safety

A Pakistani teenage Christian girl who previously had been abducted and forcibly converted to Islam has again been kidnapped by the same man, her father has said.

Salman Masih said the man again kidnapped his 15-year-old daughter, Muskan Salman, as the family visited their remote hometown, Tando Ghulam Ali in Badin, Sindh province, on February 18 to attend the funeral of a close relative.

Muskan had escaped from the Muslim on December 15 after being coerced into a false marriage.

Masih said his daughter was home with her 10-year-old cousin while all other members of the family had gone to the funeral when the man and an unidentified accomplice broke in and took her away at gunpoint.

'When we returned home, we saw that my niece was crying in the courtyard while Muskan was missing,' Masih told Christian Daily International-Morning Star News. *'The child told us that she and Muskan were playing when the two men forced their way into the house and took Muskan with them.'*

Masih said that he immediately informed the police and tried to get an abduction case registered against the abductor, but officers refused to register his complaint.

'It's been over 10 days since Muskan was taken, but the police are not taking any action,' he said. *'[The man] is also missing, and we have no information about their whereabouts.'*

The family was making efforts to find Muskan without any result, he added.

'I made a grave mistake by taking Muskan to our hometown for the funeral without consulting our lawyer,' Masih said. *'I thought that we would discreetly attend the funeral, commiserate with the bereaved family and return to Karachi the next day without [the man] getting any information about our presence there. But I was wrong.'*

The man had been threatening the family and demanding that Muskan be returned to him as his 'legally wedded wife', according to Masih.

'We are very concerned for our daughter's safety, and the police's indifference to our plight is exacerbating our fears that we may not be able to see her again,' he said, appealing to the provincial government and senior police officials to intervene.

Muskan was first abducted from her home in March 2024. The Masih family had filed a First Information Report accusing the man of kidnapping, but Muskan was coerced into declaring that she was 19 years old and that she had converted to Islam and married him of her own free will, her family learned. In Sindh province, the legal marriage age for both genders is 18.

The kidnapper, estimated to be between 25 and 27 years old, forcibly converted Muskan to Islam and forged a marriage certificate as legal cover for the crime, Masih said. She escaped on December 15 and was reunited with her family.

- **Please pray for Muskan's safe return.**

(Source: Christian Daily International-Morning Star News)

**HELPING
OPPRESSED
CHRISTIANS**



*Laos boasts beautiful scenery and a vibrant culture but in rural areas Christians can face severe challenges to their faith from family and community
Stock photo*



Pastors take fiery trials in their stride

On a recent trip to communist Laos, Release International's James Fraser, along with colleague Josh Simpson, spent time with church leaders on the frontline who see persecution simply as a validation of their ministry

Christianity may have gained a certain level of acceptance in the popular South-East Asian tourist destination of Laos but scratch beneath the surface and you'll find deep hostility and discrimination persisting towards believers.

Following the killing of a pastor last year I wanted to find out what life was really like for Christians, especially church leaders, and particularly whether the shooting of Thongkham Philavanh (pictured) had affected their behaviour.

What I found was both surprising and reassuring.

I had recently attended a church leaders' conference in the UK and wasn't sure what to expect from the equivalent experience with a group of pastors from Laos. One marked difference was the intensity of the conference programme: these dedicated brothers and sisters began their first session before breakfast at 6.30 and did not finish evening worship until midnight!

However, what was even more notable was their attitude to suffering for the gospel. Release International's partner, who organised the conference, told us that the pastors



Thongkham Philavanh, pictured with his wife, was killed by gunmen outside his home last year

thought it strange that we were so interested to hear their stories of persecution. For them, suffering was not anything unusual. In fact it was a normal part of following Jesus, as well as being a validation to them that their ministry was on the right track.

It reminded me of 1 Peter 4:12-13: *'Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.'*

One of those we met who has accepted this 'normality' of persecution is Pastor 'Phouang'*.

Phouang worries that his life is at risk



Since he witnessed police breaking up a house church meeting more than 10 years ago, Phouang has dedicated his life to reaching a minority people group in rural Laos. Christians from this particular tribe are forced to meet together outside their villages after dark but, thanks to Phouang's help in providing resources and training, this underground church is growing.

Phouang's work has not gone unnoticed by the authorities and three years ago he was arrested and interrogated. *'The police could not understand why I cared so much for these tribal people,'* he said. *'They accused me of being drugged on religion and offered me money to stop the work.'*

Since then Phouang has continued to face harassment. People who visit him are followed and put under pressure to give up their faith. The authorities have threatened to discredit him, through accusations of immoral behaviour or by planting illicit material. He has been rearrested several times, and even had a gun pointed at him.

Phouang worries that his life is

genuinely at risk. Last July, a pastor in Laos, Thongkham Philavanh, was murdered by masked men outside his home after being warned several times to stop his Christian activities (see *Voice*, October-December 2024).

Sometimes Phouang wonders if he should leave the area; his wife is not sure how she would manage if she lost her husband. But then they ask: *'Who would take care of the believers?'*

Ultimately, they are committed to continuing the work. *'Deep down I feel like I am being used by God and will leave a good legacy among the people I am serving,'* said Phouang. He asked us to pray for him and his wife.

Officially, Laos is a one-party communist state and the hammer and sickle flag dutifully flies on every street corner alongside the red and blue national colours. But the reality of life in this beautiful South-East Asian country is more nuanced. The legacy of French colonial days lingers in the architecture of the laid-back capital, Vientiane. Adventuring backpackers flock to the scenic trail of the Mekong river. And Chinese investment is delivering efficient, modern infrastructure projects.

Over time, Christianity, which was once heavily suppressed, has gained a certain level of acceptance. The Laos Evangelical Church (LEC) is an officially recognised denomination and has some freedom in its operations. However, outside this authorised framework, Christians cannot easily meet together, and in certain parts of the country evangelism and distribution of Christian literature remain heavily restricted.

In rural areas, Christians are especially vulnerable to mistreatment and discrimination. Although Laos is nominally Buddhist, in practice many villagers hold to a more traditional animist belief in local spirits whom, they believe, control events and must be honoured and appeased.

WITCH DOCTOR

One of those who was previously more heavily involved in such occultic practices was Pastor 'Vong*', who had been trained as a witch doctor from his youth.

He told us: *'I had heard about Jesus but I didn't care because my interest was in the spirit world.'* He was later

chosen to work with one of the officials in his village because he was seen to have special spiritual powers.

However, Vong's world was turned upside down when his son, who had been studying away from home, returned to the family dwelling. Vong was so glad to see him but was immediately concerned when he refused to wear the spiritual amulet he gave him. His son had become a Christian and instead of honouring the spirits he now wanted to lead people to Jesus.

Vong was upset and worried. He thought that the evil spirits would be angry and stop protecting his home so he gave his son an ultimatum: give up your faith in Jesus or face eviction.

Soon afterwards his son moved out, but not before leaving behind a Bible and other Christian books. Drawn to read them, Vong began to learn about the character of God. He was convicted of his sin and wanted to get rid of the idols in his life. Eventually he gave his life to Jesus and was soon inspired to share his faith.

However, when other villagers found out they quickly reported him to the police and Vong was arrested and interrogated. The police told him he would be released only if he gave up his new faith. Vong said, *'At that time I didn't have good Bible knowledge but I did know that God was powerful because after I came to faith the evil spirits left my house. So I prayed that God would help me to pass this test.'* He refused to recant and after five weeks behind bars he was released.

Since then Vong has faced a number of other challenges. He was prevented from giving members of his church a Christian burial; he was told that if he didn't stop preaching he would be evicted from his village; and he was threatened with prison and put under pressure to sign a paper agreeing to stop his Christian work. However, throughout these trials Vong's faith has remained strong and he has been greatly helped by attending the regular conferences organised by Release International's partner.

'The seminars help me understand more about the Bible and give me



Vong was arrested and interrogated

wisdom to know how to respond to persecution and protect church members,' he said. *'The fellowship gives me strength and encouragement, and helps me not to feel isolated.'*

LEADER HEALED

As well as being influenced by animist beliefs, life in rural Laos follows traditional social and communist party hierarchies. The village leader is an important and respected figure invested with the authority to make and enforce key decisions. Residents who do not fall into line face discrimination, ostracism and even eviction. And when someone is evicted from their home it is very hard for them to be accepted in another place without a certificate of commendation from the head of the village they have left. In turn, village leaders are expected to maintain order and adhere to the priorities of the higher party authorities.

Pastor 'Somsak'* was one of those leaders until he was miraculously healed after placing his faith in Christ. As the number two leader in his village he had detested Christians and had not even wanted to hear the name



Somsak was ostracised after his conversion

'Christian'. But then he became very sick. He went to hospital and offered sacrifices to the spirits but nothing seemed to make him better. Then he remembered that his father had left a Bible in his house. He went home, read it, and spoke to some of his relatives who were Christians. They explained the gospel to him and he put his faith in Jesus. Miraculously, he was then healed from his illness.

However, soon afterwards, he started to face opposition. Officials told him that if he wanted to continue in his position he would have to renounce his faith; if he did not stop following Christ they would take away his land and stop all government support.

'How could I refuse Jesus'

Pastor Somsak refused to concede and two years ago his status as village leader was removed. He told us that he would have been promoted to the number one position if he was not a Christian but then he added defiantly, *'How could I refuse Jesus and choose my position in the village over Him when He healed me!'*

Since then the head of the village has told Somsak's neighbours to have no relationship with him and he has faced many insults. When the electrical grid was extended to his village the authorities refused to connect his home. He has been under pressure to sign over his land and he was threatened with eviction. Then later, when he actually wanted to move on, the head of the village refused to sign the permission papers.

Pastor Somsak asked us to pray that he will have wisdom for the future. He said, *'If God wants me to stay in the village and be salt and light, then God will make a way. I want God to do a miracle in the village, to show His power and lead people to the truth.'*

It was clear from talking to these pastors that our brothers and sisters in Laos are facing many trials. However, they are not surprised. They are realistic about what it means to follow Jesus in the world and they are persevering in their ministry.

*Names changed to protect identities

Supporting risky discipleship

Josh Simpson meets a partner whose team has experienced severe persecution in order to see lives changed

‘We take every risk except unnecessary risks’, says ‘John’* the team leader for our partners in Laos.

Laos is a risky place to be a Christian and John knows that only too well. He weeps as he remembers a phone call informing him that one of his friends and co-workers had been brutally killed for his Christian faith. He does not want another phone call like that.

For many years, his team has experienced extreme persecution as it has taken countless risks in order to see the gospel proclaimed, disciples made and churches strengthened throughout Laos.

Despite the opposition and hostilities, John has witnessed countless lives transformed as people from all over the country have encountered Jesus Christ.

Today, our partners, led by John, continue to remain actively involved in a variety of ministries in Laos, including Bible translation and distribution, provision of audio devices containing Bibles and discipleship materials, radio broadcasting and training seminars.

In recent years, Release International has contributed towards these vital seminars which bring together Christian leaders (often in a neighbouring country). The seminars are designed to encourage, empower and teach on a variety of biblical topics. Just as importantly, they provide an opportunity for fellowship and friendship amongst Christian leaders from Laos, reminding them that they are not alone as they take risks to serve the Lord.

Our partners also regularly respond to incidents of persecution by

providing pastoral care, relocating families, providing food and shelter and helping to establish small businesses.

Thanks to the support of Release International, they were able to buy two cows for a family whose farm had been destroyed by village elders angry at their vibrant Christian faith; and have provided basic living costs and medical supplies for Bounchan, an elderly Christian who was imprisoned for 14 years.

Our partners continue to make a significant difference to countless Christians throughout Laos.

And yet the risks remain very real for those leading the work. As John says: *‘It is dangerous to be the face of a ministry. Delegation is important.’*

John outlines how Christianity is starting to be tolerated but at the same time the authorities do not want it to spread. People are permitted to worship in their own homes but they are not allowed to gather together. The local authorities even try to force people to renounce their faith through harassment and more generally by making life as miserable as possible for them. Occasionally police attend church services to spy on those present, to intimidate believers and to try to identify weak points in the congregation.

That’s why Release International does what it can to encourage, stand with, and pray for, these faithful, courageous, risk-taking brothers and sisters who witness for Christ as He builds His church in Laos.

*Name changed to protect identity



Young Christians enjoying the service

Building church in an enigmatic land

IN ITS description of Laos, the Lonely Planet website declares: ‘Vivid nature, voluptuous landscapes and a vibrant culture collide with a painful past and optimistic future to make Laos an enigmatic experience for the adventurous.’

Spending a few days there it is immediately obvious why there is a booming tourist industry, with backpackers of all ages seeking that enigmatic experience. It is everything the Lonely Planet describes and more.

For a few days in Laos, we were able to experience this vibrant culture but, without doubt, nothing compared to the opportunity we had to have fellowship with Christian brothers and sisters at a Sunday church gathering.

Having heard that Christianity was generally more tolerated in the cities we were excited to see how this worked out in practice.

On the Sunday morning we were collected by ‘Nyok’*, and his young son. Nyok works with our partners in Laos and had agreed to host us for the day. Following a quick coffee stop, we were driven to the other side of the city, away from the tourist hotspots, turning down numerous dusty alleyways, before arriving at a compound with several buildings. There was not much space to park, but that did not matter as most of the believers had arrived by motorbike.

Before long we were ushered into one of the buildings where around 60

people had gathered. There was a joyful enthusiasm as Christians of all ages raised their voices in worship together. When the songs had finished they sat on cushions on the floor.

Throughout the meeting, which lasted almost three hours, a number of people brought testimonies and words of encouragement, while one of the leaders shared a powerful, heart-stirring message from the Scriptures.

It was inspiring to be part of such a vibrant gathering but, as we said our goodbyes, it became clear that many of the believers would be going back to homes and communities where they would face discrimination and hostility because of their love for Jesus.

Later, at Nyok's home, surrounded by piles of Bibles and Christian literature in the various languages of Laos ready for distribution, we prayed for strength and perseverance for the growing church in Laos. While it is undoubtedly a place of wondrous nature, beautiful landscapes and vibrant culture, it is also a place where opposition and hostility to the church go hand in hand with the advance of God's kingdom.

Josh Simpson

*Name changed to protect identity



COUNTRY PROFILE



Capital: Vientiane

Population: 7.9 million

Government: Communist party-state

Languages: Lao – also French, English and various ethnic languages

Religion: Buddhism, animism, Christianity

PLEASE HELP OPPRESSED CHRISTIANS

In Laos and around the world today Christians face hostility from a number of sources: hostile authorities, militant groups and even local communities and families.

Your gift can bring encouragement, pastoral care and practical support to our precious sisters and brothers in Christ.

Please make a gift today by using the enclosed form, calling 01689 823491 or giving online at releaseinternational.org.



Growing fear grips the church in Malaysia

The rise of extremism is increasing pressure on Christians, writes Release International's Stephen McIlroy


Malaysia is famed as a multi-cultural melting pot of ethnicities that has until recently prided itself on its tolerance and fusion of cultures. Its population includes 62.5 per cent Bumiputera (Malays and indigenous peoples), 20.6 per cent Chinese and 6.2 per cent Indian.

That harmony, which has seen the majority living peacefully together, enjoying such aspects as each other's traditions, food, religion and even clothing, is, however, being eroded in both subtle and overt ways as radicals attempt to turn it into a more strongly Islamic state.

Since independence in 1957 the

country's leaders have taken pride in protecting this rich cultural heritage, particularly as the various ethnicities have each contributed to a united society that has until recently shunned disharmony.

However, many now feel that the ethnic majority are being increasingly favoured. The rise of extremist



The church continues to shine the light of Christ in Malaysia but believers worry that dark times lie ahead
Stock photo



Pastor Raymond Koh was abducted off the streets in a military-style operation more than eight years ago and has not been seen since. His wife, Susanna, continues to seek justice for her husband

producer; the discovery of a bomb under the car of a prominent lawyer; the banning of a bakery from putting Christmas messages on cakes; the posting of threatening videos online; the incarceration of some in Islamic Purification Centres. Justice is still to be served in some of these cases – such as Susanna Koh's legal quest for the truth of her husband's whereabouts.

Freedom of religion in Malaysia is protected by law and all citizens have the right to practise their beliefs, provided they do not share them with the majority Malay Muslims. All Malays are by legal definition Muslim, and it is almost impossible for them legally to convert to another religion. In addition, being a Muslim in Malaysia means a person is governed by *Sharia*, which co-exists alongside the country's civil law. Tensions are strained, though, as many cases have revealed *Sharia* courts trying illegally to expand their jurisdiction. The law does not prohibit a Muslim converting to another religion, but it does forbid a non-Muslim publicly sharing their faith with a Muslim (although there is nothing to stop someone discovering another religion online).

ID CARD SHOCK

Subtle oppression exists beneath the surface of society. For example, many rural Christians are illiterate and often choose to live away from modern culture. It has been discovered that numbers of them have been registered as 'Muslim' on their official identity cards without their knowledge. Trying to amend this identification is almost impossible.

One of those who has felt the impact of this is 'Norman'* , who lives in a

village that has been Christian since evangelists came to the area in the 1990s. A few years ago, government officials came to the community to offer people identification cards. Norman's father was unwell and Norman thought the cards would prove beneficial in helping his father to receive medical treatment. A few months later, when they received their cards, they were shocked to discover that their status had been recorded as Muslim. Norman did not think much about it at the time because, to him, it was just a piece of plastic but, when his brother decided to get married, he was dismayed to discover that his Christian bride was now required to convert to Islam to marry him. It was only then that Norman's family realised the implication of their enforced, new status. Norman, his brother and other villagers are currently going through a legal process to change their status. Their case, which is by no means an isolated one in Malaysia, has been pending for three years.

By law, when 'Jenny'* married a Muslim, she had first to convert to Islam. The couple had two children, a boy and a girl, who were brought up as Christians even though their identity cards stated Islam. They very carefully had fellowship with other Christians and grew in their faith but it was very difficult for the girl as a secret believer, especially in school where she was forced to attend Islamic studies and was constantly being urged to practise Islam.

As an adult, the daughter tried to get her status changed and approached the *Sharia* courts but, eight years on, her case is still pending. When she had children of her own she decided not to register them so that they would not be identified as Muslims. However, as a result, the children have been denied education and medical care.

Jenny's son married a Christian woman but he did not legally register the marriage, preferring instead simply to have a wedding in a church, meaning that the marriage was not officially recognised. As a result their children have not been legally recognised either and face similar medical and schooling issues. A case to obtain legal recognition for them has been pending for almost six years.

Malays within the Muslim majority has brought with it an agenda to turn Malaysia into an Islamic country ruled by *Sharia* (Islamic law). Today they are the largest group within the majority.

This increasing tension has become more visible in recent years: Malaysia has seen the abduction of Pastor Raymond Koh; the raiding of one of the country's leading churches; the jailing of journalists for 'insulting Islam'; the threatening of a film

SECRET BELIEVERS

For those coming to Christ from Muslim backgrounds, identification cards are only the start of their concerns. This group find themselves heavily persecuted, with the majority of them living secret lives. In some cases, their family has discovered their new faith, which has led to them facing physical abuse or house arrest in an attempt to force them back to Islam.

In most states of Malaysia, apostasy is punishable by law: in Perak, Melaka, Sabah and Pahang apostasy is a criminal offence punishable by a fine or prison term.

In Pahang, courts may impose up to six strokes of a cane, while the maximum penalty for apostasy in the states of Kelantan and Terengganu is death – although courts have never imposed this penalty and its legality remains untested.

‘Fatimah’* was born a Malay Muslim but when she was a teenager her mother became a Christian and shared the gospel with her and her sister. Ever since then, they have been living secretly as Christians.

When Fatimah wanted to marry a Christian foreigner living in Malaysia he first had to agree to convert to Islam. They knew it was just for the sake of documentation but the couple now have two children and are worried for their future, particularly about them having to undergo an Islamic education.

At one point Fatimah even considered turning back to Islam but has decided instead to leave Malaysia for the sake of her children’s education.

This oppressive atmosphere, coupled with the rise in extremism, has instilled fear into the hearts of many in the wider Malaysian church.

The threat of legal punishment for sharing the gospel with Muslims has, sadly, seen many churches closing their doors to Malay believers, in order to protect their congregation. As a result, Malay believers are left isolated and undisciplined, which has an impact on their personal spiritual growth.

Those who have been disowned by their families can struggle financially after losing their home and livelihood.

‘The church is facing an increasing danger in Malaysia that we need to be aware of and praying against,’ said Paul Robinson, Release International CEO. ‘The wider population, but particularly Christians, need wisdom and discernment to know how to combat the radical groups that are trying to sow disunity in the country.’

*Names changed to protect identities

PRAY FOR MALAYSIAN CHRISTIANS

- **For the Government of Malaysia as it attempts sensitively to handle the growing political pressure from radical groups**
- **For believers, particularly from Malay backgrounds, who are experiencing an increase in intolerance**
- **For fairness and acceptance to be maintained within society, especially in light of the recent attempt by a *halal* chain of bakeries to ban the writing of ‘Merry Christmas’ on their products**
- **For tolerance to be shown by the public, some of whom have been urged on by radical groups, throwing petrol bombs at a number of large supermarkets, creating tension and anxiety in the population and fear among the minority Christians**
- **For Malaysian believers, whether from Chinese, Tamil or Malay backgrounds, to remain strong in their faith and to resist increasing intimidation**
- **For the safety of house churches as they become increasingly important for persecuted believers. Pray for local established churches to see the importance of these places and to start supporting them**



Muhammad Khalil Abdul Hadi, pictured with his father, Abdul Hadi Awang, publicly congratulated the Taliban on taking power in Afghanistan

POLITICAL DIMENSION

The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) is a political party that is known to be inclined towards extremism. For example, Muhammad Khalil Abdul Hadi, the son of the PAS president, Abdul Hadi Awang, publicly congratulated the Taliban when it took over Afghanistan in 2021.

PAS has been trying to implement a Bill known as RUU355, which would increase *Sharia* punishment power by raising *Sharia* courts’ maximum sentencing limits to 30 years’ imprisonment, a RM100,000 (£8,000) fine and 100 strokes of the cane. Currently, the limits are a jail term of three years, a RM5,000 fine and six strokes of the cane. Many NGOs and lawyers have voiced their concern, claiming the change would put *Sharia* courts on a par with the High Court – which would contravene the constitution – and that *Sharia* judges are not adequately trained.

As a result Christians are becoming ever more afraid. The Government has announced that it is still drafting RUU355 after facing criticism, but that it will nevertheless go ahead and table the Bill this year. PAS has the most seats in the Parliament so even though it has been defeated by the coalition Government it is likely that RUU355 will not have much difficulty being passed.



Musa says: 'We cannot stop the persecution, but we stand with those who are persecuted'

this is my place; I have to die with these people. If [God] gives me this [ministry], I'll die for them.'

Since that day, many more have turned to Jesus: *'From 2006 up to 2024, more than 24,600 have come to Christ ... and are in the church now. Also there are now 300 house churches, in different parts of Ethiopia.'*

However, such growth comes at a cost.

'We are choosing to plant house churches to try to minimise persecution. Where Muslims are in the majority, it is very difficult to plant [public] churches because there is persecution. We cannot stop the persecution, but we stand with those who are persecuted.'

Both converts and evangelists face opposition in a variety of forms. Divorces are issued against Christian spouses, property and possessions are confiscated, and familial rejection is a normal experience for new believers. Our partners provide spiritual and practical support which includes shelter for those who have nowhere safe to go.

As for Joshua, with the support of our partners, he has established a small business and continues to receive pastoral care as he struggles to come to terms with the horrific deaths of his wife and children. However, as a sign of Christ's love in him and the measure of healing he has received he is now helping Musa to train believers in evangelism. It seems that nothing can stop the church in Ethiopia continuing to grow!

*Names changed to protect identities

'This is my place; I have to die with these people'

Our partner is working with even those who have suffered traumatic loss to reach out with the gospel, writes Release International's Charlie Frank

A convert to Christ who lost his wife and children in a horrific attack is now helping to train evangelists to share the gospel.

After 'Joshua'* encountered Jesus in a dream, his life changed forever. Born and raised a Muslim, he was not looking for Jesus but the Lord sought him out and, soon after, Joshua and his young family gave their lives to Christ.

Not long afterwards, however, he and his family were attacked by militants angry that he had converted to Christianity. He was stabbed and left for dead in a pool of blood, so severe were his wounds. Yet, somehow, he survived. Sadly Joshua's wife and children died of their injuries.

Now a childless widower, Joshua returned to his native Ethiopia but because of his new-found faith in Christ, he was not welcome in his hometown or even among his family.

Thankfully, however, he came across Release International's new partners, who are reaching out to rural Ethiopians with the gospel to win them for Christ. In doing so, they have planted hundreds of house churches and brought thousands to a saving faith in Jesus. To multiply this harvest, a fundamental part of their mission is to disciple and equip believers from Islamic backgrounds for evangelistic work.

'Musa*', who works for our partners, recalled for us his own journey to serving in this ministry, which included an Ezekiel-like vision of dead bodies being raised to life after hearing the gospel proclaimed to them.

MOVED TO TEARS

Initially nervous about reaching out with the gospel, Musa was deeply affected when a group were moved to tears after they came to faith in Jesus. Musa told us: *'I said to myself,*

PRAY

- For Joshua's healing and protection; and that Musa would be inspired in his teaching, blessed in his ministry and kept safe
- That our partners' teaching programmes would be effective
- That converts would stay close to Jesus and grow in their faith in the face of severe persecution



Afghan believers make it to freedom!

*Thanks to a Release International partner,
Christian families who have been forced to flee
persecution are finding a new life in Brazil*

While 'Ahmad'* was working as a police officer in Afghanistan – before the fall of the Government and the seizing of power by the Taliban Islamist militant group in 2021 – a friend gave him a copy of the *Jesus* film to watch.

The timing could not have been more providential. While on a dangerous mission with his unit a little while later, the officers were caught in an explosion, causing Ahmad to cry out to

the God he had seen in the film, '*Jesus, save me!*'

All of his colleagues were killed in the bomb blast but Ahmad survived. He believes that it was Jesus who saved his life that day; it was also the day that he made a decision to follow Christ.

After this incident, his daughters would read Ahmad and his wife, 'Jamila'*, portions of Scripture they had been given and various Christian books. The whole family



Ahmad, pictured with his wife, children and a nephew, was the only one of his police unit to survive a Taliban bomb blast

was convicted by what they described as the 'beauty of Jesus' and was convinced that following Him was true life.

Ahmad told others about his Saviour but when the Taliban regained power they had no choice but to go into hiding. A month later they knew that they would have to try to escape Afghanistan altogether which, for a family of ten (including a two-month-old boy), would be no mean feat.

Ahmad and his family were not the



only believers to have to contemplate leaving. Before the Taliban regained control around 10,000 Christians were able to be open about their faith.

RISKY ESCAPE

Despite the risks, Ahmad, Jamila and their children secured a ride on the back of a pick-up truck with ten other desperate people and so began the perilous journey to freedom across miles of arid desert.

Despite having little food and water, they said they knew Jesus was providing for them. When the truck broke down they were forced to walk for three days in the freezing cold and wondered if they would all be able to survive the journey but thankfully the whole family, including the youngest son, made it safely to Pakistan.

There Ahmad was able to obtain employment but the family still did not feel safe because of the risk of being deported back to their homeland.

Thankfully in due course the family was able to make contact with a pastor from the US and two from Pakistan, who provided practical and pastoral care. They stayed in the home of one of the Pakistani ministers who helped them to obtain visas to Brazil. During this period Ahmad, Jamila and three of their children were baptised.

Having been settled in South America for some time now they consider our partner's team as their 'family'. They have been well looked after, and have received food, clothes and medical help.

The family is well-integrated into a local church and the children especially have excellent Portuguese and have quickly become accustomed to life in Brazil.

Ahmad is thankful that he and his loved ones are now safe. However, he continues to experience back pain from the bomb blast, which makes physical work difficult. Please pray for his healing.

'I fell in love with Christianity'

Another couple – 'Grace'* and her husband, 'Luke'* – are also settling into life in Brazil after being forced to flee Afghanistan. They have a three-year-old son.

Grace grew up in a Christian family in Afghanistan so was able to enjoy freedoms that Muslim girls were not able to experience, even though she had to be secretive about her faith outside the home.

Like Ahmad, Luke, who had been an atheist, came to faith after watching the *Jesus* film. He said: *'I soon fell in love with Christianity.'*

However, when his family found out that he had become a Christian they kicked him out for a month, before reluctantly allowing him to return home. According to Islamic law changing religion should lead to imprisonment or death. His sisters are now more accepting, but his father still tries to convince Luke to return to Islam.

When the Taliban took power Grace and Luke were forced to flee the country.



Grace and Luke had no option but to escape Afghanistan

They spent two years in Pakistan, helping fellow Afghan refugee families, before an opportunity arose to relocate to Brazil.

At first they were apprehensive about going, owing, perhaps ironically, to fears about Brazil's levels of crime and drugs, but they have loved being in South America and have felt extremely well looked after and cared for.

They described their time with our partner as *'a great experience'* and, like Ahmad and Jamila, talked about the team as *'like their own family'*.

A local church has welcomed them in and has helped the young family pastorally and practically. In fact they described how they felt as *'being rescued from death'*.

**Names changed to protect identity*

PRAY FOR AFGHANISTAN

All are suffering under the Taliban rule, but Christians, who are in hiding, as well as women more generally, are particularly vulnerable.

- Pray for protection for secret believers, especially that they may be able to have safe fellowship
- Pray that Christians would receive good teaching via radio and other media broadcasting into Afghanistan
- Pray that God would draw Taliban members to Himself



When Mrs Lee received her first Bible from her uncle, she could not read well and became frustrated. However, she is thankful that God has opened both her physical and spiritual eyes so that she can read and understand Scripture

The unstoppable nonagenarian testifying to God's enduring love

Despite persecution and personal tragedies, one dynamic Korean great-grandmother continues to inspire the next generation

‘Who’s in charge?’ the soldiers shouted as they brandished a sickle before a small group of North Korean believers. The believers were gathered outside a small church in a mountainous village in South Pyongan province while other villagers watched cautiously.

A young preacher stepped forward

and the soldiers instructed him to put his neck under the sickle. As the preacher bent down to put his head under the sharp blade, an elder of the church, with a white beard, stepped forward. *‘This young man should not die. I will die in his place,’* the elder said. The preacher objected, but the elder once again said that he should be the one to die.

The soldiers were shocked. One of

them said: *‘Everyone asks for their life. But both of you are willing to die. You are the only ones who are willing to die for what you believe.’* Confused, the soldiers walked away.

One of the villagers who witnessed this event was a frightened 12-year-old girl. Now 96 years old, Mrs Lee will never forget what happened that day.

Although not a Christian at the time, the Lord continued to work in her heart in other ways. Her uncle, a North Korean Christian, gave her a Bible and a hymn-book and told her that she must believe in Jesus. Her grandmother, also a Christian, preached the gospel over the mountain passes as she travelled through North Korea. The Lord used her family members to plant the seed of the gospel in her heart, which would eventually grow to full maturity shortly after she went to South Korea.



Mrs Lee leads students in a hymn

BADLY BEATEN

Since Mrs Lee was not a Christian in North Korea, she was never targeted for her faith in the ways that many there are. However, after coming to faith, she was persecuted in an unlikely place — South Korea — and from an unlikely source — her husband.

During the Korean war in the 1950s, like so many of their compatriots, Mrs Lee, her husband and their two children fled to South Korea. She was only 22 years old but she had already been married for seven years. After arriving in South Korea, she and her husband had five more children.

However, Mrs Lee's husband did not approve of her new-found faith in Christ. Not only did he not approve, he was willing to do almost anything to stop her from going to church.

Mrs Lee recalls that her husband would cut off her hair, hide her clothes and severely beat her in order to discourage her from attending church. She remembers one particular incident when she was sitting on the floor feeding their baby and he hit her so violently that she was knocked over. He then grabbed her bag, where she was hiding her Bible, and threw it into the stove to burn.

This was not a one-off occurrence. Her husband would beat her so severely that her face was often

badly bruised and swollen. However, during those difficult times, Mrs Lee reminded herself that, if she suffered persecution, she would have a crown. In fact, every time she was beaten she would imagine another crown appearing on the spot where her husband had hit her.

One night, when Mrs Lee was participating in a late-night prayer meeting at her church, her husband came in, looking for her. In his confusion, he mistook another woman for Mrs Lee and dragged her out of the building and beat her in the churchyard.

Unfortunately for him the woman happened to be the wife of the head of the village. When he discovered this, he was terrified of what would happen. However, the woman he beat did not tell her husband, instead enduring the beating for the sake of Mrs Lee.

This was the event that changed his life dramatically. He immediately stopped beating his wife and allowed her and the children to go to church whenever they wanted. He even started going to church himself. After many years, shortly before he died, he surrendered his life to Christ.

MINISTERING AT 96!

Mrs Lee survived war, plague and persecution but she has experienced a number of personal tragedies as well, including the the death of four of her

children. She recalls that after losing one child she was asked if she would still believe in Jesus. Mrs Lee replied: *'My children were given to me by God, and God is the one who has taken them away. I will not leave Jesus, no matter what!'*

Even though Mrs Lee is in her 90s, she continues to share Jesus with whomever she meets.

Our partners, Voice of the Martyrs Korea (VOMK) said that when they first met her, they had expected their North Korean Underground University (UU) students to try to evangelise and disciple her. However, the students, who are aged in their 60s and 70s, *'became like children as they listened to Mrs Lee share about her life. And Mrs Lee not only shared about her life, she also encouraged the UU students never to take their faith lightly.'*

VOMK added: *'Our UU students were both challenged and thankful to meet a 96-year-old North Korean great-grandmother, a living witness who has seen "tribulations, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and the sword". She was able to testify that nothing is indeed "able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord".'*

Mrs Lee has reminded the students that, when persecution comes, the only way to endure it is by holding on to God.



TESTAMENT OF YOUTH: A Release International representative receives a £750 cheque from youngsters at Bramhall Baptist Church, Stockport. The children raised the money to help persecuted Christians through a sponsored event memorising the books of the New Testament

Concerts hit the right note

A big thank you to the thousands of supporters who joined us for the two inspiring concerts at Belfast's SSE Arena held in partnership with the leading hymn writers, Keith and Kristyn Getty.

The Gettys, who now live in Nashville in the US, are no strangers to the subject of Christian persecution; they have a long-standing relationship with Release International as well as our sister ministry, Voice of the Martyrs in America.

The two December performances followed their highly successful *Sing!* event in Northern Ireland in 2023, in which Release International's ministry was showcased.

This time the evenings included the showing of our new video, *Lives Laid Down*, about persecuted Egyptian Christians, which is now available on our YouTube channel.

'Thank you to everyone who joined us for these two evenings, to Keith and Kristyn and to all those who helped on both nights to make them such wonderful occasions,' said Release International CEO, Paul Robinson.

**Recycle this
magazine:
share it with
a friend!**



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:

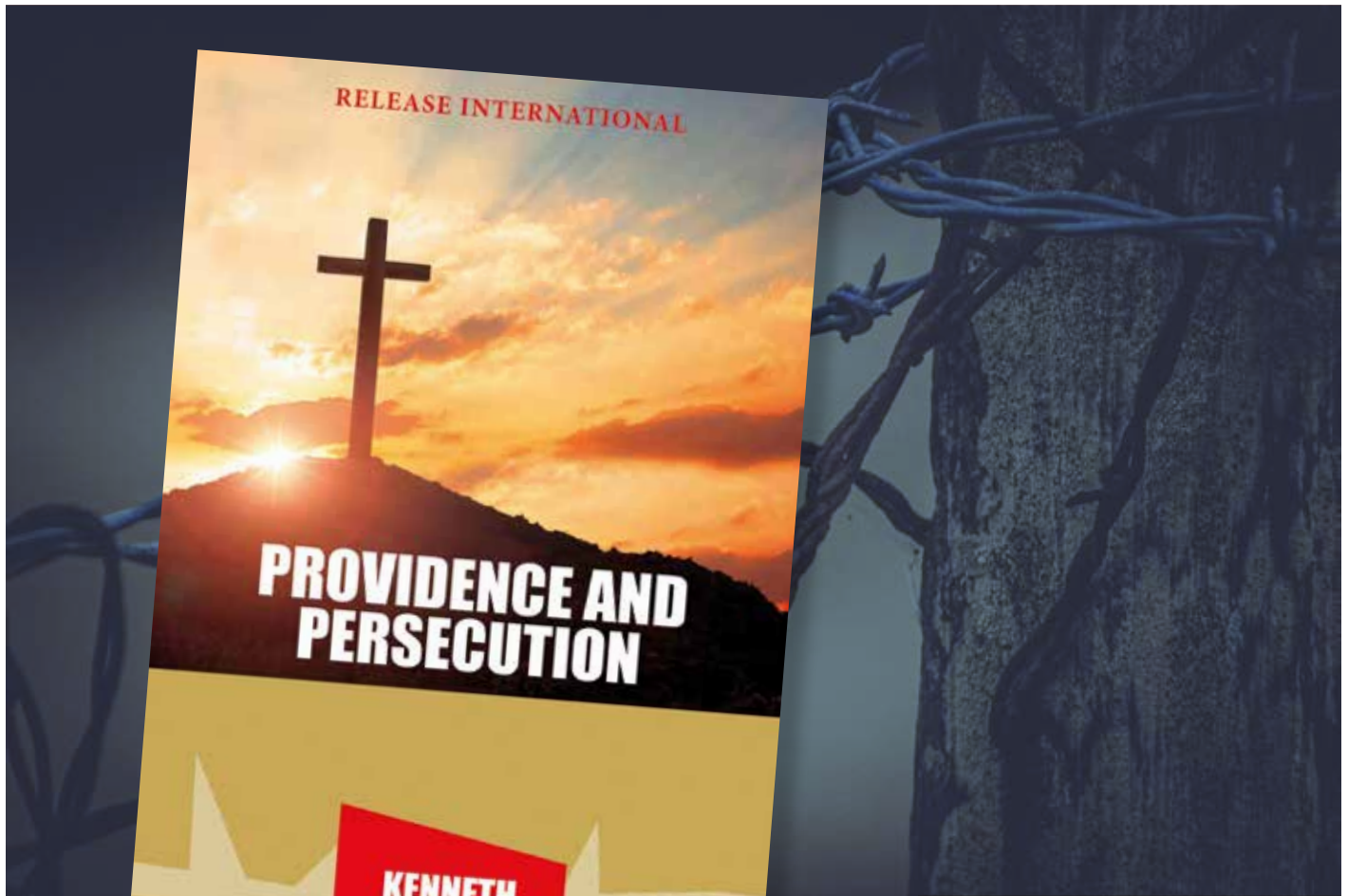
Jonny on 07861 656269

Central England & Wales:

Allister on 07916 396178

Scotland & North of England:

James on 07434 894016



Providence and Persecution

If God is sovereign, why does he allow the awful persecution of his beloved children?

Understandably, that is a question that taxes many Christians.

Release International's new book, *Providence and Persecution*, looks at the important biblical theme of God's sovereign providence and how this helps us to respond to the painful reality of the persecution of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world.

The book offers a robust, biblical picture of our sovereign, creator God. Biblical examples, as well as those from the lives of contemporary Christians, serve to remind us how

God is at work – even in the midst of persecution – to bring about his good purposes.

Petr Jašek, who spent more than a year in a Sudanese prison for his Christian work (and whose story is told in the book, *Imprisoned with ISIS*), has written a moving Afterword to the book. The Foreword is by North American Old Testament scholar, Stephen Dempster.

This very readable and helpful new resource will be available soon, and can be pre-ordered from Release International (01689 823491) for £10 (including postage and packing).

What others have said about this book

'Reading this book will certainly change the way that you view persecution, and may change the way you view God.'

John Stevens, National Director, FIEC

'This is a book for all Christians to read, to pray over and by it to be strengthened in their faith.'

Archbishop Ben Kwashi

'Reading this book helped me again to see that, as we ponder the harsh reality of what our brothers and sisters in Christ are suffering for the gospel, the sovereignty of our loving Father God is in fact satisfying, faith-sustaining and, in its own way, comforting.'

Paul Robinson, CEO, Release International

THE WORD

Persecution seeks to destroy the church but it can never outsmart God's purposes, writes Charlie Frank

The redemptive power of Christ in those forced to flee

There can be few things as desperate as being forced to flee your home. To those of us blessed with comfortable lives, the idea of being driven from your home, and maybe even your own family, is as alien as it is frightening. It is not a desirable aspiration now and it certainly was not the aspiration of the early church either. Whilst Acts is known as the book of the Bible that details the spread of the early church across Asia and the Mediterranean, the opening seven chapters are focused exclusively on the church in Jerusalem. It's not that there weren't other Christians elsewhere, but Jerusalem was at the centre of the early church.

The shift in outlook occurs in Acts 8, the events of which unfold in the aftermath of the first Christian martyrdom:

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria... Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. (Acts 8:1,4)

Hereafter, Acts becomes a much more international book. The Jerusalem church has by no means made its last appearance, but the focus moves beyond Judea's borders. The cause of this shift? Persecution.

This is not to say that persecution is a good thing, or even necessary

to the growth of the global church; far from it. Neither ought we to have the mindset of 'silver linings'; that is cheap and shallow.

Instead, we ought to marvel at the redemptive power of our God.

Persecution's aim is very simple: to destroy the church. Forcing people to flee from not only their homes but their homeland is designed to do just that.

Far from weakening the church, this persecution serves as a catalyst to accelerate church growth!

It attempts to weaken the local church in the area from which Christians are fleeing, crush the faith of those forced to flee and serve as a deterrent to non-Christian onlookers

from ever accepting Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

But that's not what unfolds in Acts. Far from weakening the church, this persecution serves as a catalyst to accelerate church growth! For those that fled did not have their faith crushed but took their faith with them and preached the word wherever they went. Across the ancient world Jews and Gentiles alike came to faith. This is the power of Christ!

But what about today?

In our own age of decline within the western church, there are new churches in the UK that are growing at breathtaking pace. Their source? Christian exiles from China and Hong Kong. Let's wait, with bated breath, to see how God uses the persecution of his church in our own age.

INSPIRING FAITH



'Christians must not be afraid of the darkness in the world. They must work. The Bridegroom comes soon. True children of God cannot meet Him empty-handed.'

Pastor Richard Wurmland 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.



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 us if I have: • 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 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!

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 there are any changes to the amount, date or frequency confirmation of the amount and date will be given to you at the time of the request. • If an error is made in the payment of your Direct Debit, by Release International or your Bank or Building Society, you are entitled to a full and immediate refund of the amount paid from your Bank or Building Society, if you receive a refund you are not entitled to, you must pay it back when Release International 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.

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.

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

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

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

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R120

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

Will you leave a legacy of enduring faith and love?

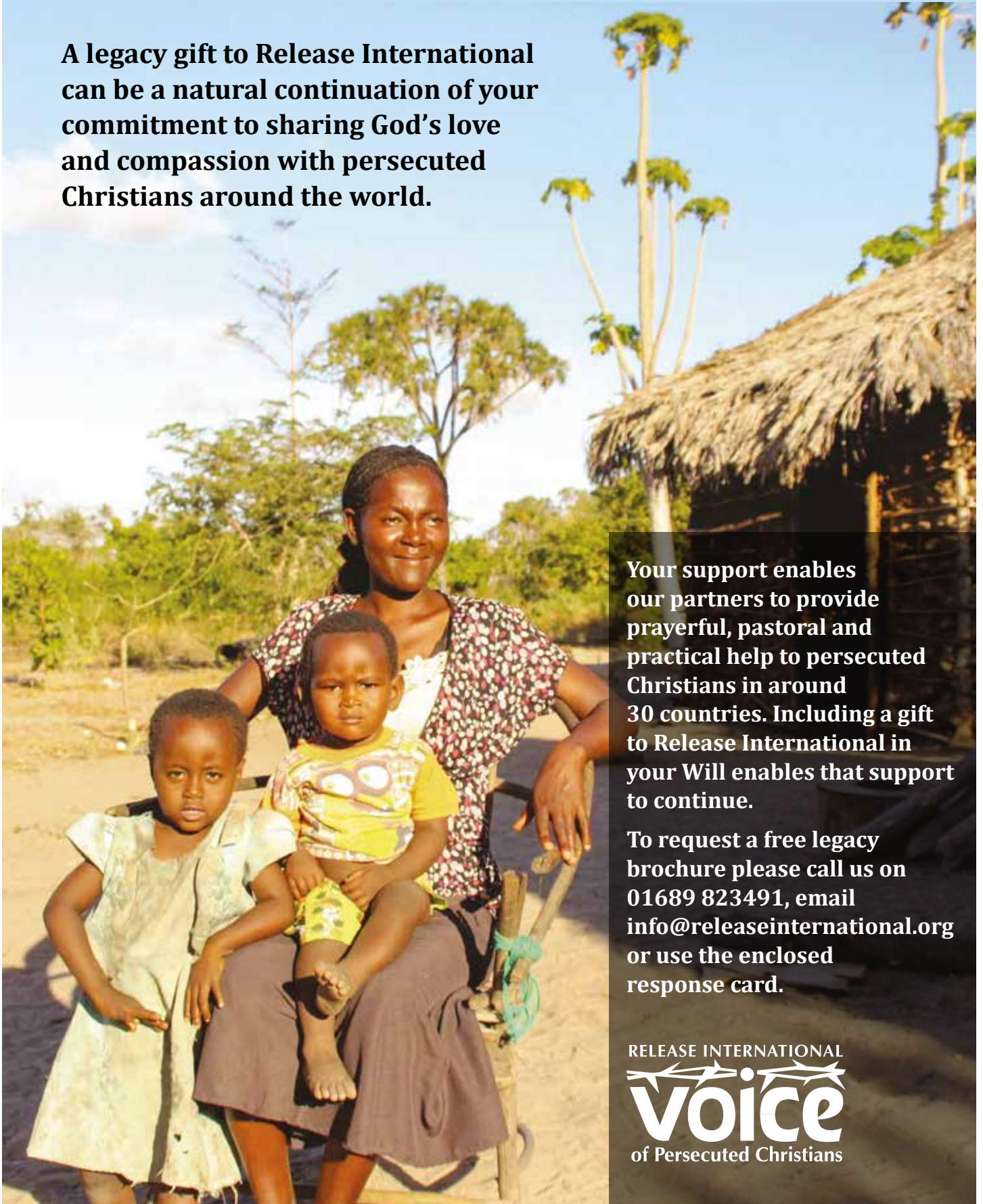
A legacy gift to Release International can be a natural continuation of your commitment to sharing God's love and compassion with persecuted Christians around the world.

Your support enables our partners to provide prayerful, pastoral and practical help to persecuted Christians in 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@releaseinternational.org or use the enclosed response card.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

Voice
of Persecuted Christians



prayershield

Apr-Jun 2025



Rev Faiz is a beacon of hope to those living through difficult times in Baghdad and beyond

APRIL 2025

Heavenly Father,

Please remind my persecuted brothers and sisters, especially those who have been forced to flee, that in every circumstance You are with them, holding their right hand and ready to help (Isaiah 41:13). May this bring them freedom from fear.

Help them to forgive those who harm them and to resist the temptation to retaliate.

Thank you that Your victory on the cross and Your resurrection mean that they, and I, can come boldly into Your presence to ask for mercy and grace in time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

Amen

IRAQ

TUESDAY 1: Ask for God's blessing on Rev Canon Faiz Jirjees (pictured) and his ministry at St George's Church in Baghdad. Pray that he may continue to be a beacon of light and hope to those living through dark and difficult times in the capital city and beyond.

WEDNESDAY 2: Pray for Sinan Hanna – Rev Faiz's assistant (see previous day) – who is undergoing theological training, and that God would bless the next generation of Iraqi Christians.

THURSDAY 3: Pray for the health clinic and two schools run by St George's Church in Baghdad and for all who encounter the

gospel of love – in both word and deed – through using their services.

FRIDAY 4: Pray for Christian Syrian refugees, many of them widows, who are living in Kurdistan. May they know God's guidance about whether and when to return to Syria now that President Assad has been deposed. Pray for protection on their journeys and a blessing on their homecoming.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians

SATURDAY 5: Pray for Release International partner, 'Hand of Help', in Kurdistan and for grace and protection for team members as they travel within Iraq and beyond.

SUNDAY 6: Pray for protection and lasting fruit for a Release International partner's ministry with gospel seekers and new believers in the region.

MONDAY 7: Lift up to God in prayer Iraqi Christians as they prepare to celebrate Easter; pray that they may do so in peace and freedom, celebrating together in safety.

IRAN

TUESDAY 8: Pray for the protection of Iranian house churches which, due to security pressures, are now meeting in smaller groups than before. Pray against a spirit of fear and that, despite the difficult circumstances, they will know the peace and the presence of the Lord when they meet.

WEDNESDAY 9: Pray for those in prison who have been detained because of their ministry for the Lord, especially those who are serving lengthy sentences. Pray they will know the presence of the Lord and be able to maintain a good witness for Christ.

THURSDAY 10: Pray for the training of new evangelists and house church leaders. A group are involved in a special programme in which they spend half their time in



The formation of terrorist cells could lead to al-Shabaab entering Tanzania via the Kenyan coast

theological study and the other half in practical ministry. This will help to provide in-person resources that are desperately needed on the ground. Please pray God's blessing, protection and guidance upon them.

FRIDAY 11: Christian satellite-TV programmes and social media are a lifeline for many Iranian believers. Pray for our partners who work hard to provide meaningful content and that the ministry will bear much fruit.

SATURDAY 12: Give thanks that the number of believers in Iran continues to grow, and pray that they will be free to live their lives without fear of arrest, intimidation or assault from the regime.

SUNDAY 13: Pray for our partner's new project in Turkey which is discipling and encouraging young Iranian refugees through worship-music training.

MONDAY 14: Please pray for the Iranian Christians who are living as refugees in Turkey but now face the threat of

deportation. Pray that the Turkish immigration system will treat them fairly and compassionately.

TANZANIA

TUESDAY 15: Please pray for gospel workers in Muslim-majority areas (particularly along the coast of Tanzania) who are experiencing discrimination when it comes to obtaining medical help for themselves and their families from government hospitals because of their faith in Christ.

WEDNESDAY 16: Pray for the children of parents who are planting churches in risky environments. Pray that they may stand strong in their faith, often without the encouragement of a church community to support them. Pray too for educational opportunities so that they can excel at school and not face restrictions because of their faith.

THURSDAY 17: Praise God for large churches in Tanzania that are financially supporting the

work of outreach ministries and are providing much-needed resources to small and struggling church plants. Thank God too for the outreach work of our new partners in Tanzania.

GOOD FRIDAY: On this day that we remember the death on the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, let us lift up to Him in prayer all those around the world, including in Tanzania, who are paying the price for following Him.

SATURDAY 19: Pray for protection for a Christian school in eastern Tanzania where the teachers and students experience varying levels of persecution. Pray for the impact of the gospel on the non-Christian students at the school.

EASTER SUNDAY: As we celebrate Jesus' resurrection and the new life we have in Him, pray that our partners across the globe would be strengthened in the work He has called them to. Pray particularly that our partners would be able to support church leaders in Tanzania who are burdened by the pressures of ministry and are experiencing burn-out.

MONDAY 21: Pray for the Tanzanian Government which is trying to stop the formation of radical Islamist cells in the northeast of the country. Pray that these cells do not get a stronghold that would facilitate al-Shabaab, the terrorist group, potentially entering the country via the coast of Kenya.



'Annette' was heavily pregnant when her husband was killed by militants

BURKINA FASO

TUESDAY 22: Pray for the displaced Christian children who are receiving schooling thanks to the financial help of Release International supporters and the work of our European sister ministries. Ask God to bless their studies and help them to grow in confidence and hope for a brighter future.

WEDNESDAY 23: Pray for the many pastors who have been internally displaced; that God would guide them about whether they should return to their homes or stay where they are and minister to others who have also been displaced.

THURSDAY 24: Pray for protection, wisdom and guidance for our partner and his team, particularly for safety in travel as they move around the country, supervising the projects and encouraging and praying with persecuted and displaced Christians.

FRIDAY 25: Pray for 'Annette', whose story featured in *Voice* (October-December 2024), 'Juliette' and other widows

whose husbands were martyred for their faith, often in their own churches and in front of their congregations. Pray for God's comfort on those who mourn, and for our projects helping to restore their livelihoods.

SATURDAY 26: Pray for the large numbers of Christians and others who are living in camps on the edge of cities and for those trying to provide for their needs – both material and spiritual. Pray for the churches that are starting in these camps and for those hearing the gospel for the first time.

SUNDAY 27: Pray for the project Release International is co-funding to improve access to clean water in some of the large settlements for internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso. Pray that the wells will consistently provide clean water to all who need it.

MONDAY 28: Please petition God for peace in Burkina Faso and across the whole Sahel region. Pray for wise government, courage and integrity for security forces and justice for all religious and ethnic groups.

SOUTH SUDAN

TUESDAY 29: Thank God that many Bibles have been distributed in refugee camps for Sudanese in South Sudan. Pray for the impact of God's word on many.

WEDNESDAY 30: Pray for safety for those in refugee camps in South Sudan who have made professions of faith in Christ and are being discipled.

MAY 2025

CENTRAL ASIA

THURSDAY 1: Pray for our partner, 'Pavel', as he travels throughout Central Asia supporting and encouraging church leaders to persevere despite the many challenges they face.

FRIDAY 2: Pray that the Lord would give 'Pavel' the strength and energy he needs to continue faithfully ministering the gospel throughout the Central Asia region.

SATURDAY 3: Pray for Christian parents in several countries in Central Asia who face the threat of fines simply for taking their children to church.

SUNDAY 4: Pray against the negative influence of Moscow in this region, which asserts that all churches outside the Russian Orthodox system are agents of the West.

MONDAY 5: Pray for Christians in Kyrgyzstan where new laws are being introduced to restrict religious freedom. Under these laws, churches with fewer than 500 adult members will not be permitted legal status.

TUESDAY 6: Although the countries in Central Asia have secular constitutions the influence of Islam is growing. Pray that this will not restrict Christians from sharing the gospel in their communities.

WEDNESDAY 7: Give thanks that the most severe forms of persecution in this region have subsided and pray

that Christians would make the best use of the relative freedoms they now enjoy.

LAOS

THURSDAY 8: Pastor Thongkham Philavanh was shot and killed last July (see *Voice*, October-December 2024). Please pray for his wife and two teenage children as they continue to grieve and for other Christian leaders who have lost a dear brother.

FRIDAY 9: Please pray for Pastor 'Phouang', who is a bold evangelist reaching across tribal boundaries to a minority people group. Pray that his work would continue to bear much fruit.

SATURDAY 10: Pastor 'Phouang' (see previous day) has been arrested, interrogated, threatened, falsely accused and knows his life is at risk. Pray for the Lord's protection on him and his family.

SUNDAY 11: Pastor 'Samane' was threatened with a gun by his irate father-in-law, who subsequently kicked Samane

and his family out of their home. Pray that God would continue to provide for them.

MONDAY 12: Pastor 'Vong' was the top witch doctor in his village before he encountered Christ. Since his conversion he has experienced much opposition from the head of the village and was imprisoned for five weeks. Pray that his faithful witness would continue.

TUESDAY 13: Pray for 'John', who oversees the work of our partner in Laos: that he would have wisdom and courage to make the right decisions for the ministry. He says, 'We take every risk except unnecessary risks.'

WEDNESDAY 14: Thank the Lord for our partner who regularly gathers together Christian leaders from across Laos for times of fellowship, teaching and encouragement.

AFGHANISTAN

THURSDAY 15: Pray for 'Amir', who was imprisoned for 10 days, kicked, beaten, stripped naked and doused with cold



Pastor Thongkham Philavanh, pictured with his wife, was killed by gunmen at his home

water for his faith in Christ. His family paid for his release.

FRIDAY 16: Pray for brothers 'Zabi' and 'Aalem', who were part of the same house fellowship. 'Aalem' was arrested and under torture told the Taliban about Zabi. Thankfully Zabi and his family have managed to flee the country.

SATURDAY 17: Believers in Afghanistan are subject to random searches of their phones, and homes can be searched for Bibles and Christian literature. Pray that the Lord would protect them and give them wisdom when faced with these situations.

SUNDAY 18: Pray for 'Mukhtar', who fled from Afghanistan to Pakistan in search of safety. However, in Pakistan he has been beaten up and continues to receive death threats. Pray that God would make a way for him and his family to find a place of safety.

MONDAY 19: Give thanks for Release International's partners who produce and broadcast Christian content in a variety of different media into Afghanistan. Pray that there would be a significant response from many.

TUESDAY 20: Thank the Lord for our partner's follow-up teams which are made up of Afghan Christians who respond to inquirers inside Afghanistan who have made contact as a result of their broadcasts (see previous day), answering questions, praying and bringing encouragement.

WEDNESDAY 21: Pray that our

partner's Afghan follow-up teams would be refreshed and equipped to share the good news with wisdom and courage through multiple daily phone calls.

SOMALIA

THURSDAY 22: Praise God for a recent large network gathering of Somali believers for fellowship and encouragement. Pray that one of the continuing benefits of this gathering would be the impact on the wider Somali communities.

FRIDAY 23: Please pray for our partner organisation which has experienced a major setback that could severely impact the way it supports Somali believers. Pray for wisdom and guidance for the leadership team.

SATURDAY 24: Please pray for believers living in very hostile places or environments that suppress their freedom of belief and worship, particularly that they would have resilience in times of persecution as well as opportunities to share their faith with family members.

SUNDAY 25: Pray for Christians living under intense persecution, which has caused many to suffer mental-health issues, including depression.

MONDAY 26: Please pray for physical, emotional and spiritual strength for mature Somali Christian leaders who give so much to supporting new believers. They often have new disciples living with

them for significant periods of time.

TUESDAY 27: Praise God for the growing number of Somalis coming to Christ around the world. Pray for God's equipping of all those who are involved in radio broadcasting, translation work and online platforms to provide opportunities for more Somalis to hear the gospel than at any other time in history.

WEDNESDAY 28: Pray that our partner's micro-finance eyecare initiative would not only meet the financial needs of those providing care as well as the health needs of recipients but would provide opportunities to share the gospel.

ETHIOPIA

THURSDAY 29: Pray for the safety of our partner's staff and their families as they share the gospel message. Praise God that many thousands in Ethiopia have come to faith since 2004.

FRIDAY 30: Pray for Ethiopian believers from Muslim backgrounds who have experienced, or are experiencing, trauma and persecution as a direct result of their new life in Christ. Remember particularly those whose families have rejected them.

SATURDAY 31: Pray for Muslim-background believers who are being trained for evangelism within rural Ethiopia. Pray that their future ministries would be fruitful.

JUNE 2025

ERITREA

SUNDAY 1: Pray for Christian children currently in prison in Eritrea. Pray that they, and their parents, would receive all the sustenance and physical protection they need. Pray too for miraculous releases and that this new, reprehensible policy of arresting children would end.

MONDAY 2: Continue to pray for long-term prisoners, some of whom have been incarcerated for more than 20 years, as well as their families. Remember particularly Kiflu Gebremeskel, Futsum Gebrenegus, Million Gebreselasie, Tekleab Menghisteab, Haile Naizghe (pictured), Rev G. Gebregioris, Kidane Weldou and Mussie Ezaz.

TUESDAY 3: Praise God for all the believers who have been released from prison. Pray that those who are still weighed down by trauma as a result of their prison experience would know the Lord's peace and healing.

WEDNESDAY 4: Praise God for the church in Eritrea and for its recent growth in spite of persecution. Pray especially that the faithful ministry of evangelists and church workers would bear much fruit and change Eritrea for the good.

THURSDAY 5: Praise God for all the Eritrean exiles studying



Haile Naizghe is one of several Christians to have been imprisoned for more than 20 years

at our partner's vocational training school. Pray that, after graduating, they would be able to find work in what is a crowded jobs market.

FRIDAY 6: Eritrean secret police search out exiles in Ethiopia to take them back to Eritrea by force. Pray that their efforts would be thwarted, and that God would keep these exiles safe.

SATURDAY 7: Eritrean exiles based in Ethiopia are praying that their country would be free and that they would be able to return. Please join them in praying for that outcome.

ALGERIA

SUNDAY 8: Pray that God gives his assurance to pastors in Algeria so that they are able to continue their work, just as the

Apostles prayed in chapter 4 of Acts.

MONDAY 9: Ask God to grant wisdom to the leaders of the Algerian Protestant church so that they can manage and organise the life of their fellowships through the current challenging period.

TUESDAY 10: Pray that the Lord protects and encourages the families of church leaders, especially those involved in court cases and facing prison sentences or fines.

WEDNESDAY 11: Lift to God in prayer Algerian pastors who have recently been given fines or prison sentences and are now appealing against their convictions. Pray also for those still on trial, all for holding 'unauthorised worship' services. May they be bold in witnessing to Jesus, even in court.

THURSDAY 12: Pray that those involved in the trials of Algerian church leaders would encounter the truth of the gospel through the grace and witness of those they are prosecuting.

FRIDAY 13: Pray that the more than 40 Protestant churches that have been closed by the Government will be allowed to re-open and resume normal worship and ministry activities.

SATURDAY 14: Pray for new believers in Algeria who face opposition within their own families. May God grant them courage and wisdom in sharing the gospel.



Gideon lost his wife and five children in a terrorist attack

NIGERIA

SUNDAY 15: Praise God for the financial provision to build a house this year for Gideon, a pastor whose wife and five children were killed in a terrorist attack at Christmas 2023. Pray that Gideon, whose story featured in *Voice* (October-December 2024), would be blessed in his new home.

MONDAY 16: Please pray for the large numbers of Christians kidnapped by militant Fulani herdsmen in Zamfara state earlier this year. Pray for their safe return and for comfort for family members who have

been severely impacted by the abductions.

TUESDAY 17: Please pray for the tens of thousands of displaced Christians who are in IDP (internally displaced persons) camps in northern Nigeria. Pray particularly for teenagers and young adults who have lost hope and are turning to drugs and alcohol to ease the pain they feel.

WEDNESDAY 18: Please pray for the Nigerian Christians who have fled to the UK to escape persecution. Pray that they will quickly find supportive churches and that God would use them here for His honour and glory.

THURSDAY 19: Please pray for the 14 men and women who are being supported through our partner while they receive formal theological training to go into full-time ministry. They have volunteered to be trained so that they can replace some of the church leaders who have been martyred in recent years. Please pray for them as they will be at extra risk of being kidnapped or killed because of their church leadership position.

FRIDAY 20: Please pray for the trauma-healing workshops run by our partners. They help adults and children

work through their grief in groups, studying Scripture together, sharing their experiences and praying for each other. These workshops play a significant part in the healing process.

SATURDAY 21: Pray for churches in the north that have had buildings destroyed and seen communities scattered. Pray too for denominational leaders as they work out how to best support their congregations.

LEBANON

SUNDAY 22: Pray that Syrian Christian refugees living in Lebanon would, like those displaced to other areas in the Middle East, know whether, and when, to return home now that President al-Assad has been deposed.

MONDAY 23: Like many living in Lebanon, Christians have been affected by the recent conflict between Israel and militant groups within the country. Pray for a lasting peace and political settlement so that all Lebanese citizens can enjoy peace and security.

Sources: Forum 18; Release International associate ministries, partners and contacts.

Names in quotation marks 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.

TUESDAY 24: Pray for our partner church as it ministers to Lebanese, Syrians and those from other Middle Eastern nations.

WEDNESDAY 25: Pray for God's blessing and protection on our partner's youth ministry and outreach work.

THURSDAY 26: Pray for the leaders of our partner church in Lebanon. They face many challenges such as high prices, recent bomb damage and displacement and need wisdom to know how to prioritise resources and make the most of opportunities for gospel ministry.

FRIDAY 27: Pray for courage for those who face opposition after taking their first steps of faith. Pray for wisdom for those who are discipling them.

SATURDAY 28: Pray for Lebanese Christians who have been displaced from the south and east of the country by the conflict with Israel. Pray that they can return to their communities and rebuild them in peace and security.

CAMEROON

SUNDAY 29: Pray for unity and protection for the church in Cameroon, especially in the northern part of the country which has been beset by civil conflict and regular attacks from Boko Haram and other militant Islamist groups.

MONDAY 30: Pray for those ministering to Christians who have been traumatised by Islamist attacks in Cameroon. Pray that those who grieve and mourn would find healing and renewed hope.

Lord Jesus

Thank You for those who continue to proclaim Your name and follow You despite losing family and home and being forced to flee.

Soften my heart so that I can weep with them as they weep and rejoice with those who rejoice as they see Your hand working to provide for them. Help me to remain earnest and faithful in prayer for them.

May Your kingdom come, Your will be done.

Amen

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releaseinternational.org

Release International, PO Box 54, Orpington BR5 4RT

Tel: 01689 823491 Email: info@releaseinternational.org

Registered Charity 280577 (Scotland: SC040456)



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