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Prayer Focus 05/12

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"The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth." Psalm 145:18, NIV

Egypt - Islamists checked in attempts to extend political dominance

The recent disqualification of Egypt's leading Islamist presidential candidates and suspension of the Islamist-dominated constitutional panel have been welcomed by Christians and secularists, who feared they were being swept away by a rising tide of Islamisation.

Ten candidates were disqualified from standing for the presidency by the Higher Presidential Election Commission on Saturday 14 April, including two front-runners from the Muslim Brotherhood. This decision followed a court's suspension on 10 April of a body appointed by the Islamist-dominated parliament to write the country's new constitution; the move was triggered by the withdrawal of Christians and secularists, who complained that the panel was not representative and lacked diversity. The court put an injunction on parliament's decision to give its own members – the majority of whom are Islamists – half the seats on the 100-member panel, pending a ruling on its legality.

- Pray that the recent political decisions will benefit Egypt's minorities, especially Christians, and that they will not limit religious freedom and democracy within Egypt.
- Pray for this troubled nation as the people go to the polls in the presidential election on 23-24 May. Pray for the establishing of wise and just government and that the Islamist agenda will not be advanced.

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Mali - Christians driven out by Islamist rebels

Christians in Mali have been forced to flee their homes in a violent rebel takeover.

Ethnic Tuareg rebels, including Islamist movement Ansar Dine and a separatist group, have rampaged through northern Mali and seized control following a military coup that overthrew the government on 22 March. Boko Haram, the Islamist group that is waging war against Christians in Nigeria, have also been involved in the fighting.

Christians have been amongst the targets. The heavily armed rebels ransacked and looted Christian homes, vandalised churches and occupied a Bible school in Gao. A Barnabas Fund contact said, "Horrible crimes have been made against the population: massacres, rape of women, obligation to wear the veil, chasing Christians. All the churches were destroyed in Gao and Timbuktu." Ansar Dine, which has links to al-Qaeda and wants to turn Mali into an Islamic state, is imposing sharia law on the region.

More than 215,000 people have been displaced from their homes. Many Christians fled south to the capital, Bamako, where an association of missions and churches has set up a crisis committee to help the displaced. Their plight is compounded by severe food shortages in the Sahel, of which Mali is a part, that have caused prices of basic foodstuffs to rocket. UN agencies and NGOs have expressed deep concern that the rebel takeover of northern Mali could further exacerbate the food crisis.

Barnabas Fund is providing aid for displaced Christian families, including food, medicines and housing.

- Pray that the interim president, Dioncounda Traore, sworn in on 12 April, will be able to restore order in Mali and end the rebellion in the north.
- Pray that all those who have been forced to leave their homes as a result of the rebel takeover will find refuge and receive the food and other essentials that they need.
- Ask the Lord to strengthen the churches in the south and give them all the resources they need as they seek to help their brothers and sisters from the north.

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Vietnam - Christian children beaten in orphanage raid

The Agape Family Centre, a Christian orphanage in Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, was destroyed and the children beaten in a late night raid on 14 April.

Shortly after midnight, a group of thugs cut the electricity to the orphanage before throwing stones and other objects to frighten the children. They then stormed the building and beat the children. Around 200 policemen arrived, but rather than protect the children and round up the offenders, they helped the mob to destroy the centre.

When Nguyen Van Binh, a local church leader who has been heavily involved in the orphanage, heard about the raid, he rushed to the scene but was blocked by police. They beat him with batons, and he received such severe blows to the head that he lost consciousness. He was taken to hospital, where his condition was described as life-threatening. Other Christians were also wounded during the attack.

In the Central Highlands of Vietnam, the 43-year-old church leader of an unregistered house church, who is highly esteemed within the Christian community, was arrested in April and convicted of handing out anti-government leaflets, “enticing ethnic minorities to commit wrongdoing” and “disrupting national unity”; he has been jailed for eleven years.

- Pray for the children and all those who were injured in the attack on the orphanage in Hanoi. Pray that they will know the Lord’s comfort in their distress and that He will provide alternative accommodation for them.
- Pray for the church leader who was recently arrested; ask the Lord to touch the hearts of the authorities and overturn the conviction.

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Kenya - Grenade attacks leave three Christians dead

One person was killed and ten wounded in a suspected grenade attack on a church in Nairobi, Kenya, on Sunday 29 April.

This follows a similar incident on 31 March in Mtwapa, near Mombasa, when Muslims threw a grenade into an open-air gathering involving over 150 Christians. One woman was killed at the scene while a young boy died from his injuries two days later; around 50 people were wounded. Muslims had been holding a meeting near the Christian gathering; the Christians could hear the Islamic preachers railing against Christianity before the attack took place.

A Barnabas Fund contact in Kenya said that there has been a concerted Muslim backlash against conversions from Islam to Christianity. At Ukunde, south of Mombasa, Muslims have ordered a church to close down within six months.

- Pray for those who were injured in the recent grenade attacks, and for those who mourn following the deaths. Pray that they may know the peace of the Lord in their grief.
- Pray that the Christian community in Kenya will be able to reach out to their Muslim neighbours with Christ-like love and compassion.

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Sudan - Escalating conflict leaves Christians in peril

Christians in Sudan and South Sudan are facing increasing danger as the threat of war mounts. Fierce clashes during April were described as the worst fighting since South Sudan gained independence in July 2011. The UN Security Council has expressed its “deep and growing alarm” over the “escalating conflict” and has called for an end to aerial bombardments by Sudanese forces.

On 22 April, the African Union (AU) called on Sudan and South Sudan to abide by a plan that requires both parties to pull their forces out of the disputed border region. The hostility between the two nations has left thousands of people of Southern origin, who are mainly Christian, in a state of limbo (see April *Prayer Focus Update*).

- Pray that the UN and African Union will be able to broker peace between Sudan and South Sudan and that the issues underlying the conflict will be resolved to the satisfaction of both nations.
- Pray for all those who have been left in a state of limbo without official citizenship of either country, and pray that the Lord will protect His people in both Sudan and South Sudan from violent attack.

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Nigeria - Anti-Christian violence rages on

Rt Rev. Timothy Yahaya, Bishop of Jalingo, Tabara State, told Barnabas Fund that 300 Christians have been killed in the Diocese of Jalingo in a series of incidents over the last three weeks.

His report comes as a gun and bomb attack at Bayero University campus, Kano, left at least 16 people dead and six people injured. The attack happened on Sunday 29 April as Christians were holding a worship service. Later that day, there was an attack at the Church of Christ in Nigeria, Maiduguri, which left five people dead. Nobody has yet claimed responsibility, but the violence bore the hallmarks of the Islamist group Boko Haram, which also attacked Nigerian churches over Easter.

On Sunday 8 April at around 8.40am, at least 38 people were killed in a suicide bombing outside two churches during Easter services in Kaduna, the capital of Kaduna State. Most of the victims were motorcycle taxi drivers who were caught up in the blast.

- Pray that those who mourn their loved ones following the latest violence in Nigeria will find comfort in the Lord. Pray for an end to

the persecution against Christians in this troubled country.

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Syria - Christians suffer as violence continues

Despite a UN-brokered ceasefire, the Christian community is still suffering enormous distress as the conflict rages on between supporters and opponents of President Bashar Assad. The churches have not come out publicly for either side, but the opposition thinks that they support Assad and so is hostile towards them. A strongly Islamist element is prepared to attack them simply for being Christians.

One Syrian church leader spoke about the suffering of Christians in Homs (see April *Prayer Focus Update*): “The tragedy in Homs is very huge, it bleeds the heart… you start to feel that Homs is a jungle full of wild beasts.” Church leaders are now reluctant to travel at night as they are symbols of the Christian presence in Syria and may be targets for assassination. The authorities warned the churches not to get together in large numbers over the Easter period in case their meetings were bombed.

Parallels are being drawn with Iraq, where the descent into violence and chaos in the last decade has virtually wiped out its churches. The same destructive process seems to be beginning in Syria. Another church leader said, “I am not very optimistic that our Christian community will survive.”

- Pray for our brothers and sisters in Syria, and particularly in Homs, where conditions are very poor for the few Christians who remain. Pray that the Lord will grant them strength to endure their trials.
- Pray for leaders of churches in Syria, that they will know God’s guidance at this difficult time and be able to protect their flock, spiritually and physically.
- Pray for an end to the violence and that peace will be restored to Syria.

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Hungary - New religion law criticised by Euro body

Legislative reforms in Hungary that restrict religious freedom have been deemed “excessive” and “discriminatory” by the Council of Europe’s advisory body on constitutional affairs.

Following widespread opposition to the country’s new constitution and associated laws, the Venice Commission was asked to examine the code, which came into effect on 1 January, to assess whether it complied with Hungary’s obligations under international human rights law.

A new law on religion granted state recognition to 14 religious groups and decertified the rest, meaning that over 300, including a number of major Protestant denominations and many small Catholic orders, lost their official status. Barnabas Fund was among those to raise concerns about restrictions to certain rights and freedoms, particularly for religious groups.

- Praise God that the concerns regarding the reforms in Hungary were taken seriously and examined by the European body. Pray that the Hungarian government will introduce amendments that will restore and guarantee religious freedom for all.

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India - Christians persecuted in a series of attacks

Christians in India have endured a range of violent incidents in recent weeks. On Easter Sunday, 8 April, the Rev. Ratnababu and his family were attacked in their home in Andhra Pradesh by Hindu extremists. Some gagged and bound his son, Madhu, while others threw chilli powder in the pastor’s eyes before assaulting him and his wife.

On 2 April, Hindu radicals went to a government school in Akkarapettai, Tamil Nadu, and announced a reward for children who had Christian literature in their homes. They then harassed the children who said that they did, and summoned their parents, threatening to expel them from the village if they continued going to church. The next day, they searched houses for Bibles and Christian literature, tearing up the texts that they found. The offenders told one family who boldly said that they were worshipping Christ to vacate their house, and locked twelve Christian families out of their homes for three days.

On 30 March, around 100 radical Muslims forced their way into a prayer meeting at a Christian couple’s home in Nutangram village, West Bengal state. They beat up a number of the men and women and chased them all, along with their children, threatening to kill them. A crowd of around 500 Muslims watched in amusement as the Christians were tormented in this manner for around an hour and a half.

- Pray that the Lord will bring healing to all those who were distressed and harassed in the recent attacks. Pray especially for the children, as they are particularly vulnerable during times of persecution.
- Pray for protection for our brothers and sisters in India who endure such harassment. Pray that God will open the eyes of their attackers, that they may accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

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