

Prayer Focus Update

BRINGING HOPE FOR SUFFERING CHRISTIANS

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***“Since you are my rock and my
fortress, for the sake of your
name lead and guide me.”***
– Psalm 31:3

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Nigeria – Pastor and wife appeal for help in video after a year in captivity

Your prayers are urgently requested for Nigerian pastor Paul Musa and his wife Ruth, who were abducted more than a year ago by the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram from their home in northern Borno State.

In a video posted online by the kidnappers on 5 May, Pastor Paul calls on the government and the Christian Association of Nigeria for help in securing their release. The couple were abducted in March 2023.

Pastor Paul says that Muslims kidnapped at around the same time have been freed and resettled in their communities. “Yet we have been forgotten. Why?” asks Pastor Paul. “Why does the government not care for us? Is it because we are Christians?”

The 59-year-old pastor points out that he and his 50-year-old wife have served the church for 29 years. “Today we are not physically healthy,” he says in the video. “I and my wife, we are here. We need assistance from you.”

Churches and Christian communities in Nigeria’s North and Middle Belt are frequently targeted for attack. It is estimated that around 45,000 believers have been killed by Islamists since 2009, the majority of the killings taking place in the two regions. Many hundreds of thousands have been displaced.

Ask the Lord to draw close to Pastor Paul and his wife Ruth and comfort them in their captivity. Pray that God’s perfect love will drive out fear and that He will strengthen their hearts as they hope in Him (1 John 4:18; Psalm 31:24). Pray that they will be released unharmed soon and able to resume their ministry.

Egypt – Extremists attack two Christian villages in Upper Egypt

Please cover our brothers and sisters in southern Minya Governorate, Upper Egypt, in prayer after separate attacks by Muslim extremists on two Christian communities.

Several houses belonging to Christians in Al-Fawakher village, around 150 miles south of Cairo, were set alight late on 23 April, according to a local Christian source. The attack on the village near the city of Samalut was launched in response to an attempt to build a new church.

“When religious fanatics failed to expel Christians from their homes as a form of punishment, the extremists burned down their houses while they were still inside,” the source reported.

The following day Church leader Anba Makarios said on his Facebook page that the authorities had contained the unrest and arrested those responsible.

On 26 April Muslim extremists attacked Christians in Al-Kom Al-Ahmar village after learning that a church had obtained a permit to construct a church building.

“The security forces moved to the village, and the situation was brought under control and a number of the perpetrators were being arrested,” a Christian advocacy group reported.

Around a third of Egypt’s Christians live in Minya Governorate. Christians, who make up 10% of the population of Egypt, say that their situation in the Muslim-majority country is now better than it has been in living memory. The president has been quick to give verbal and practical support to the Christian community whenever anti-Christian incidents occur and his government is working steadily to legalise churches following the repeal of Ottoman-era restrictions in September 2016.

Give thanks that the authorities were on the scene to prevent either incident escalating. Pray for increased protection of Christians in Egypt’s rural areas. Ask that homes damaged will be rebuilt. Pray that God will continue to build His church throughout Egypt, and that communities whose churches are legalised will be able to renovate and restore buildings for worship without harassment (Matthew 16:18).

Algeria – Senior church leader’s “illegal worship” prison sentence upheld

Please redouble your prayers for Algerian church leader Pastor Youssef Ourahmane whose one-year sentence for “illegal worship” has been upheld by the Court of Appeal in Tizi Ouzo, Algeria in a verdict released at the end of April.

Pastor Youssef, Vice President of the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA), was scheduled to have his second appeal against a prison sentence and a fine heard in court on 26 March.

Pastor Youssef was charged with allegedly holding an unauthorised religious meeting in a building not permitted to be used for religious worship (see *Prayer Focus Update*, November 2023).

The charge relates to Pastor Youssef’s supervision in March 2023 of several Christian families who stayed at a church compound that includes a chapel that has been sealed by the authorities.

At his first appeal hearing on 19 November 2023, Pastor Youssef’s original two-year imprisonment was reduced to one year, but the accompanying fine of £605 (\$725; €665) remained the same.

In rejecting his second appeal, the Court of Appeal added a further six months’ suspended sentence on top of the one-year prison term. An appeal to Algeria’s Supreme Court is being prepared.

Pray that Pastor Youssef and those supporting his case will not grow weary in their pursuit of justice. Pray that the appeal to the Supreme Court will be heard and the sentence overturned, and that Pastor Youssef will be released to resume serving God’s Church in Algeria. Give thanks that he has witnessed God using arrests of Christians to bring the Gospel to many in authority in Algeria, including police, judges and government officials, who would not otherwise hear it, and changing many hearts (Philippians 1:12-14). Ask the Lord to use the opportunity to extend His kingdom as the case is brought before higher courts.

Iran – Christian convert denied medical care in prison; Convert bailed after four months’ detention

Prayer is needed for 60-year-old Iranian Christian Mina Khajavi, who is reported to be struggling with pain and unable to access the necessary medical care inside Tehran’s Evin Prison.

Mina, a convert from Islam, has arthritis and walks with a limp, and is serving a six-year sentence for “acting against national security by promoting ‘Zionist’ Christianity” in her role in a house church.

Farsi (Persian)-speaking Christians, being converts from Islam, are punishable as apostates according to Islamic law. Unlike the historic Armenian- and Assyrian-speaking Christian communities they are not permitted to hold church services or worship freely.

Mina began her sentence this year on 3 January (see *Prayer Focus Update*, February 2024). She was arrested in 2020 and sentenced in 2022. However, she was not required to begin her sentence until she had recovered after being run over by a car just before her sentence was due to start in the summer of 2022.

Mina’s ankle was badly broken in the accident, and she had to have metal plates fitted.

Now inside prison, according to a source close to her family, Mina is still in pain but has not received adequate care. It is reported that the only treatment she has received has been occasional painkillers.

Mina was sentenced alongside Iranian-Armenian pastor Joseph Shahbazian, who received a ten-year sentence and another Christian convert Malihe Nazari, who like Mina was sentenced to six years. Both Joseph and Malihe had their sentences reduced after retrials in 2023 and have been released from prison.

Mina is applying for her case also to be heard in a retrial.

Another Iranian Christian convert was released on bail of more than £8,000 (\$10,000; € 9,300) on 30 April after spending more than four months in detention.

Esmail Narimanpour was arrested at around 6pm on Christmas Eve, 24 December 2023 and charged with “acting against national security by communicating with Christian ‘Zionist’ organisations” (see *Prayer Focus Update*, February 2024).

Esmail’s home in Dezful in western Iran was raided in a search conducted without a warrant, and Christian books were confiscated. He was held in Ahvaz, around 100 miles south of Dezful. Esmail was among several converts cleared of “propaganda” charges in 2021 but subsequently forced to attend Islamic classes.

Esmail was arrested alongside at least 45 other Christians across Iran in a crackdown on house churches during the Christmas period.

Lift up Mina to the Lord and pray that she will soon be provided with access to the medical care she needs. Ask that her retrial request will be granted, and that she will soon be released. Pray that she will know Christ even more and the power of His resurrection, even as she participates in His sufferings (Philippians 3:10). Give thanks for Esmail’s release on bail. Pray that he will experience God’s strength and guidance as the legal process continues. Ask that His righteousness will soon be revealed, charges against Esmail will be dropped and his case will be dismissed (Isaiah 56:1).

Myanmar – Military imposes tight restrictions on church services in Chin State capital

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Christians in Christian-majority Chin State, Myanmar need supporting in prayer as the country’s military (Tatmadaw) has placed severe restrictions on church services and other religious activities in Hakha, the state capital.

On 22 April the Tatmadaw ordered a ban on all assemblies of more than five persons for religious gatherings in the

city in response to an attack by militia on a convoy carrying government ministers.

The ruling Myanmar military has imposed restrictions on religious activities, including Sunday services, in Hakha following the attack on 12 April.

“In Chin State, every family has more than five family members,” one church spokesperson observed, “So, gathering and praying can be affected under the new order.”

The order will be in force for two months, until 22 June.

Since 2 February 2023, seven townships in the state have been under martial law, with a curfew imposed and gatherings of more than five persons banned. That same month the military authorities issued an order for Christians to submit a list of all those attending church services.

Around 85 percent of the 478,000 population of the mountainous and impoverished Chin State are Christians.

Pray that Christians in Hakha and throughout Chin State will grow in resilience as they find ways to share fellowship despite the tightening of restrictions. Ask that God will richly bless legal gatherings of under five persons while such bans are in force and that Christians use the opportunities provided by one-to-one contact to deepen relationships and experience spiritual growth (2 Peter 3:18). Ask that the authorities will recognise the unworkable nature of such bans and that they will be retracted.

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