

Prayer Focus Update

BRINGING HOPE FOR SUFFERING CHRISTIANS

Prayer Focus Update | Number 329 | March 2024

“Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.”
– Psalm 62:8

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Mozambique – Ten Christians killed in terrorist campaign

Our Christian family in northern Mozambique needs sustaining in prayer after ten Christians were killed in a series of attacks waged over two weeks against Christian villages.

Islamic State (IS – also known as ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) claimed responsibility for the onslaught while launching, on 4 January 2024, the group's new global terror campaign, "Kill Them Wherever You Find Them", announced in an audio message by its spokesman, Abu Hadhayfah Al-Ansari.

This new campaign's title is based around the notorious "Sword Verse" in the Quran, which says "Fight and slay the pagans wherever you find them" (Q 9:5). Thus, it is clear to Muslims that those to be targeted in the campaign are non-Muslims, specifically Christians.

The wave of renewed violence in northern Mozambique centred on three districts in Cabo Delgado province, already known as "the land of fear" because of repeated Islamist terror attacks.

The latest wave of attacks began on 3 January in Mocimboa da Praia district when IS fighters struck the village of Ntotoe, killing three residents and burning down a church and more than 60 houses.

Two days later they hit Chimbanga village, murdering three Christians and torching over 70 houses and three motorcycles.

Two Christians were murdered and 16 houses burned down in attacks on Chai and Litamanda villages in Macomia district on 4 and 9 January, respectively. Two believers were killed in an attack on Chinda in Muidumbe district on 5 January.

Around 1,800 Christians have been murdered in northern Mozambique since October 2017 in sustained anti-Christian violence.

Cry out to the Lord for our brothers and sisters in northern Mozambique. Pray that He will shield them from further harm and comfort them as they mourn the loss of loved ones. Pray that Christians in Cabo Delgado will know the Lord to be the stronghold of their lives (Psalm 27:1) that will not allow room for fear.

Laos – House church torn down by village authorities

Christians in Laos urgently need our prayers. Whilst citizens of Laos have the right and freedom “to believe or not to believe in religions” according to the country’s constitution, followers of Jesus are still subject to repeated harassment in rural areas.

Village leaders and residents tore down the private home where Christians were gathered and interrupted a worship service in Savannakhet province on Sunday 4 February.

“The village authorities came here and tore down our home at around 10.30 am Sunday morning,” reported a worshipper at the church in Kaleum Vangke village in Xonboury district. The eyewitness added that the mob burned Bibles and other documents in the assault.

A “Law on the Evangelical Church”, in force since December 2019, gives Christians the right to conduct services, preach throughout Laos and maintain contacts with believers in other countries. The law is not well enforced in rural areas; the Kaleum Vangke church did not escape attack despite being affiliated with the Lao Evangelical Church, the only Christian denomination recognised by the government.

The tearing down of Christian homes and eviction of Christians from villages has happened repeatedly in country districts in Laos. (See *Prayer Focus Update*, December 2023).

Pray that the law will be upheld throughout Laos and that Christians will be able to worship in peace. Ask the Lord to sustain and strengthen believers in Kaleum Vangke in this unsettling situation. Pray that our brothers and sisters will receive Divine encouragement to build on the secure foundations established by our precious cornerstone, the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:4), even when man-made structures are torn down. Pray for an end to evictions of Christians in rural parts of Laos on account of their faith.

Nigeria – Thirty deaths in Islamist attack on Christian community in Plateau State

Yet again our attention is drawn to the suffering of Christians in Plateau State, in Nigeria's Middle Belt.

Thirty people were killed in an attack by suspected Fulani Islamists on a Christian community in the state on 24 January. The gunmen invaded Kwahaslalek and neighbouring villages in Mangu Local Government Area shortly after midnight. They had defied a 24-hour curfew declared by the state governor Caleb Mutfwang in response to the worsening security situation in the area.

Pray for those mourning the loss of loved ones and ask for the Lord's intervention to protect Christian communities in Plateau State. Pray that our brothers and sisters will know that God has kept track of all their sorrows and recorded all their tears (Psalm 56:8). Ask that they will receive wise spiritual counsel and practical support as they seek to rebuild their lives.

Turkey – Convert shot dead by Islamists in Istanbul church

The precarious position of Christian converts from Islam in Turkey was laid bare by a fatal shooting in Istanbul on Sunday 28 January.

Tuncer Cihan, a convert from Islam, was shot dead by Islamist terrorists in a targeted attack during a church service in the Sariyer district on the European side of the city. Two masked gunmen entered the church at around 11.40am and killed him before fleeing the scene.

Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) later claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement on its Telegram channels. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed condolences to the church leaders and strongly condemned the murder. Police subsequently conducted a series of raids across the city, which resulted in 47 people being detained and both suspects arrested later that day.

Pray for the protection of the Christian community in Turkey, especially converts from Islam, and that such acts will not be repeated. Give thanks for the swiftness of the Turkish authorities in responding and pray for wisdom as they seek to defeat terrorism and anti-Christian violence. Pray that Turkey's small Christian minority will stand strong in the Lord (Deuteronomy 31:6), despite the discrimination and harassment they endure.

Turkey – Historic church to reopen as a mosque

Elsewhere in Istanbul, officials announced that St Saviour Church in Chora is to reopen as a mosque in May 2024.

Dating from the fourth century, the church was a centre of Christian worship until it was converted into a mosque during the Ottoman era, following the conquest of Istanbul (then called Constantinople) in 1453. It was ordered to be repurposed as a museum in 1945 by Turkey's secular republic, founded by Kemal Ataturk.

The plan to convert the church dates from 2020 when Turkey's President Erdoğan issued a decree that also included turning Istanbul's renowned Hagia Sophia cathedral into a mosque, a conversion that took place that year. Hagia Sophia was built as a church in the sixth century but served as a mosque from 1453 until 1935, when it was also turned into a museum.

Ask that there will be no more erosion of Christian heritage and any further plans to convert churches into mosques will be thwarted.

Pakistan – Christian brothers abducted, forced into “converting” to Islam

The ordeal of two Pakistani Christian brothers kidnapped by radical Muslims in Punjab province should drive us to prayer.

On 22 January 2024 Azam Masih, 39, a tailor, and his older brother Nadeem Masih, 41, were tortured into “converting” to

Islam. Their two captors repeatedly hit them with iron bars and threatened them with death if they did not comply.

The brothers were forced into reciting the *shahada* Islamic creed. Some Muslims assert that the mere recitation of shahada (or *kalma* in Urdu) is sufficient to convert a non-Muslim to Islam, even if the “conversion” is extracted through coercion. If a person later returns to their original religion after being forced to become a Muslim, he or she is considered an apostate, just as much as if he or she had voluntarily embraced Islam. According to Islamic law, apostasy is punishable by death, although in modern times this is rarely practised at a state level. Nevertheless, the apostasy law can inspire zealous Muslims to murder apostates.

Azam and Nadeem were released but their captors threatened to kill the brothers and their families if they reported their ordeal. After receiving hospital treatment for their many injuries, the brothers did file a report with police and at the time of writing are in hiding with their families.

Police arrested two Muslim men, Naseem Shah and Sunny Shah, and charged them with five offences, including kidnap, theft with the intention to cause injury or death, and religious hatred. Both men have criminal records and have been involved in previous incidents of inciting hatred against Christians.

The abduction in Sialkot District has shocked and caused fear among the area’s minority Christian community.

Attempts to forcibly convert Christian men or boys to Islam are rare in Pakistan. However, Christian and Hindu girls and young women are frequently abducted and forced to “convert” to Islam before being coerced into marrying a Muslim. These “conversions” are often committed under a threat of violence to the victims and their families, but the authorities rarely intervene.

Lift up Azam and Nadeem to the Lord and pray for physical, emotional and spiritual healing as they recover from their ordeal. Ask for the Lord’s protection over them and their families, and the wider Christian community in Sialkot District. Pray that

God's justice (Isaiah 30:18) will be administered fairly and proportionately to deter such attempts to secure "conversions". Pray that the authorities take action to halt forced "conversions" of non-Muslim girls and young women in Pakistan.

Iran – Convert's whereabouts unknown after midnight arrest

Another Iranian Christian convert from Islam is being held in an unknown location after being arrested at midnight on 16 January. Plainclothes agents of the Ministry of Intelligence arrested Iman Golzar from his home in Dezful, western Iran and seized his computer and CCTV cameras. His parents, who are both deaf, have been unable to discover his whereabouts.

Iman belongs to the same church as Esmail Narimanpour, who was arrested on Christmas Eve, 24 December 2023 (see *Prayer Focus Update*, February 2024).

Pray for the release of both Iman and Esmail and that they will be swiftly reunited with their families. Intercede for Christians imprisoned in Iran, often deprived of contact with families, and ask that they will know with assurance that the Lord is with them whatever the circumstances (Joshua 1:9).

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