

Prayer Focus Update

BRINGING HOPE FOR SUFFERING CHRISTIANS

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“But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

– 1 Corinthians 15:57

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Iran – Christian convert receives two-year prison sentence

Your prayers are earnestly sought for Laleh Saati, an Iranian Christian convert from Islam, who has been sentenced to two years' imprisonment for "acting against national security by connecting with 'Zionist' Christian organisations".

Farsi (Persian)-speaking Christians are converts from Islam and therefore 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.

On 13 February, Laleh, 45, was arrested at her father's home in Ekbatan, Tehran, and interrogated for three weeks at the notorious Evin Prison. After searching the house, intelligence agents confiscated her mobile phone, laptop and several Christian books. During her detention photographs and videos of her baptism in Malaysia and other Christian activities were identified as evidence of her "crime".

Laleh had lived for some time in Malaysia and applied for asylum. She returned to Iran in 2017, however, because of the length of time her asylum process was taking, and to care for her elderly parents in Iran.

Laleh was interrogated by intelligence agents on several occasions after her return. Evidence of her alleged actions against national security included involvement in "house churches" since returning to Iran and Christian activities in Malaysia, including her baptism, discovered on her mobile phone.

On 16 March, Laleh appeared before Branch 26 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court where she was sentenced to two years' imprisonment. She has also been banned from leaving the country for a further two years when she is eventually released.

Laleh's lawyer was not informed of the court's verdict until 25 March.

Pray that Laleh will know God's comfort and strength as she begins her sentence. Pray that she will know assurance of His blessing in suffering for doing right (1 Peter 3:14). Ask for Divine guidance for her lawyer for any appeal against this judgment. Ask that her situation will serve as clear evidence to immigration authorities worldwide that Christians face persecution in their countries of origin when asylum claims are delayed or rejected.

Nepal – Four Christians face trial for alleged forced conversion

Lift up in prayer four Christians in Madhesh province, eastern Nepal, who face trial, accused of trying to secure forced conversions to Christianity.

On 3 April the four believers were required to submit bail of 150,000 Nepali rupees (£895; \$1,130; €1,043) at the district court in Bara.

The allegations against them follow a visit they were reported to have made to a non-Christian family on Sunday 10 March in the town of Kolhabi. Several local residents confronted the Christians at the house and summoned the police, alleging that they were attempting to convert locals by force.

The four Nepali Christians spent 24 days in custody before being bailed.

Whilst Nepal's constitution guarantees religious and cultural freedom, a law in force since 2018 makes it illegal to convert a follower of a religion "being practised since ancient times", a ruling that protects Hindus and Buddhists but excludes Christians, who are either first- or second-generation believers.

Since 2018 more than 20 cases of persecution, including attacks on churches, have been reported, the Nepal Christian Society (NCS) commented, saying that the true number is much higher.

A Barnabas contact confirmed that several other instances of harassment of Christians occurred in preceding weeks. Two foreigners were arrested and deported from Gulmi. A Nepali Christian in Pasupati and two others in Kathmandu were arrested but later released. Extremists have attacked Christians distributing literature and torn up Bibles.

On 7 April the Ministry of Home Affairs sent out a circular to all 77 district administration offices in Nepal asking officials to warn them about individuals and organisations holding religious conferences and gatherings seeking to promote religion and religious conversions.

In a joint statement, the NCS and National Churches Fellowship of Nepal responded by saying the circular targeted the Christian community and infringed on their constitutional right to freedom of religion.

“It is systematic targeting of Christians who are among the most persecuted for their beliefs, mostly on charges of forced religious conversion, which is completely baseless,” commented Pastor Dilli Ram Paudel, the NCS secretary general.

Praise God that the Church continues to grow in Nepal. Pray for protection for believers facing harassment, for justice to prevail in the case of the four believers arrested and that any unfounded accusations of forced conversion will be dismissed. Ask for wisdom for Christians to enable their light to shine so clearly throughout Nepal that would-be opponents will instead see believers’ good works and give glory to our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

Myanmar – Church minister hospitalised after shooting during morning worship

Please intercede for Myanmar church minister Paul Khwi Shane Aung, 40, who was wounded after being shot while conducting a worship service in Mohnyin town in Kachin State on 12 April.

Two masked gunmen entered the church at 6.30am and shot Paul Khwi Shane Aung three times as he was officiating at the early-morning service, according to congregants present.

The minister was rushed to hospital in Mohnyin but later transferred to a hospital in the state capital Myitkyina.

At the time of writing no motive for the attack has been established.

The incident follows less than a month after 47-year-old pastor Nammye Hkun Jaw Li was shot dead by gunmen on 18 March at his computer shop in Mogaung township, also in Kachin State (See *Prayer Focus Update*, April 2024).

Pray that Paul Khwi Shane Aung will recover swiftly and completely from his wounds. Ask the Lord to comfort his congregation amid the trauma of witnessing this attack on their shepherd. Pray that the perpetrators of such assaults against Christian leaders will come under Divine conviction and be brought to justice (Isaiah 30:18).

Nigeria – Twenty-five Christians in Plateau State killed in attacks by Islamist extremists

Christian communities in Plateau State in Nigeria’s Middle Belt need upholding in prayer after a series of attacks by Fulani Islamist extremists. Twenty-five Christians were killed and more than 3,000 displaced during attacks on four communities in the state between 12 and 19 April.

More than 50 armed terrorists descended at night on the villages of Mandung-Mushu and Kopnanle in Bokkos Local Government Area (LGA) on 12 April, targeting the unarmed residents as they slept. Twelve people were killed in the assault when the terrorists “set fire to homes and a place of worship, mercilessly gunning down fleeing civilians”, said barrister Farmasum Fuddang, chairman of Bokkos Cultural Development Council.

Another 12 Christians were killed on 19 April during an attack in Pushit, Mangu LGA. On the same night a student at Plateau State University in Bokkos was killed when Fulani Islamists attacked Chikam community.

Many sustained injuries and were treated in medical facilities in Mangu.

Lift up to the Lord our persecuted brothers and sisters in Nigeria, so that they stay strong in their faith and continue to know God's love and protection in these times of fear and uncertainty (Philippians 4:1). Pray for comfort for the bereaved, healing for the injured and that the needs of the displaced will be met.

Zimbabwe – Barnabas ready to respond after state of disaster declared

Zimbabwe declared a state of disaster and issued a hunger alert on 3 April, saying that very low rainfall will lead to 2.7 million people facing food shortages this year.

“Due to the El Niño-induced drought ... more than 80% of our country received below normal rainfall,” President Emmerson Mnangagwa said in a speech appealing for international aid.

“If the drought continues and crops fail this year, it will take Zimbabwe years to recover, and many of our brothers and sisters will suffer,” Barnabas' Africa coordinator warned.

About 70% of Zimbabweans grow their own food, and the ongoing catastrophic drought hinders their ability to harvest enough to feed their families. “The situation in Zimbabwe is dire right now. A farmer I was speaking to informed me that they won't even harvest 5kgs due to the drought, yet he has a farm of about ten acres. They are very desperate,” said our project partner. Compared to the several thousand kilos of maize that a farmer can usually harvest from an acre of land, the shortfall is alarming.

Food insecurity and hunger levels are climbing rapidly in this growing crisis, and thousands have already died. Food prices are soaring because harvests have failed, and land used for livestock pasture is deteriorating, leading to further shortages.

Call on the Lord for rain to fall in the required proportions this year to yield the crops to ease the shortages. Give thanks for the aid that has been delivered and pray that much more will reach hungry Christians in Zimbabwe.

Barnabas Aid provides practical aid for suffering Christians in over 60 different countries.

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