

Prayer Focus Update

BRINGING HOPE FOR SUFFERING CHRISTIANS **Prayer Focus Update** | Number 335 | **September 2024**

***“But as for me, I watch in hope
for the LORD, I wait for God my
Saviour; my God will hear me.”***
– Micah 7:7

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produced by Barnabas Aid

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Laos – Pastor shot dead by masked gunmen; Six Christians released after month-long imprisonment

Prayers are needed for a Christian community in northern Laos after a pastor was shot dead at his home on 23 July, a Barnabas contact reports.

Two masked gunmen shot Pastor Thongkham Philavanh seven times. His wife took him to hospital, but he was pronounced dead on arrival.

Pastor Thongkham's wife, son and daughter were unharmed. Barnabas Aid partners are assisting the family with funding for essential costs at this difficult time.

The motive for the shooting, although unconfirmed, is widely acknowledged as a response to Pastor Thongkham's faith in Christ. The pastor was chairman of the regional branch of Lao Evangelical Churches.

Meanwhile, six Christians in central Laos were released on 25 July after a month's imprisonment, Barnabas Aid contacts have confirmed.

The six believers – Pastor Mum and five other church members – had been arrested on 22 June at a prayer meeting outside Tahae village.

“The authorities have warned them,” reported our contact, “and said to do only low-key Christian ministry or they will have problems again.”

There has been an active Christian community of up to 20 people in Tahae village for several years.

The six Christians were arrested at the request of the village chief, who had ordered them not to carry on worshipping at the pastor's home or anywhere else in the village. In response the Christians started meeting in a rice field outside the village but were arrested when they began to construct a small church building.

While in prison Pastor Mum was held separately from the other Christians, and had his hands and feet chained.

The national and regional authorities in Laos do not appear to be responsible for the arrests. A “Law on the Evangelical Church”, in force since December 2019, gives Christians in Laos the right to conduct services, preach throughout Laos and maintain contacts with believers in other countries, but this law is not well enforced in rural areas.

Give thanks for Pastor Thongkham’s life and pray that his ultimate sacrifice will advance the cause of the Gospel in Laos. Pray that his wife, children, wider family and the Christian community he pastored will experience Divine comfort as they wrestle with the pain of their loss. Ask the Lord to instil in them a deep awareness of the gain that Pastor Thongkham is now celebrating and to enable them to reaffirm Christ as their life even as they grieve (Philippians 1:21). Give thanks for the release of the six believers from prison, and pray that they recover from their ordeal. Pray also that the Church throughout Laos will be fortified through such trials (James 1:2-4) and that the light of the Gospel will be undimmed.

DR Congo – Islamist attacks across three provinces leave more than 90 Christians dead

Christians in three provinces in north-eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are mourning after more than 90 people were killed in Islamist attacks in July and August.

Attacks by Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP, also known as Allied Democratic Forces) in the province of North Kivu left at least 84 dead.

Thirty-five people were killed in a series of armed assaults on villages in Mamove district on 23 July. At least 20 had been found beheaded immediately following the attacks. The other 15 bodies were discovered two days later.

ISCAP had already killed at least 37 people in an attack in the same district six days earlier.

It is also feared that many residents were abducted – at the time of writing it is not known whether they remain in captivity.

Local civic leader Kinos Katuho reported that the authorities had failed to respond after he had alerted them to the presence of militants in the area.

On 10 August at least 12 more people were killed in a fresh attack in North Kivu. At the time of writing the death toll from this assault was expected to rise, with several villagers remaining unaccounted for.

The neighbouring province of Ituri has also come under attack. In an announcement from ISCAP, published on 15 August, the terrorist group boasted, “By the grace of God Almighty, the soldiers of the Caliphate captured 5 infidel Christians ... and slaughtered them, praise be to God.”

The third province to be affected was Tshopo. On 10 August ISCAP fighters killed two Christian villagers along with three soldiers. The fighters then burned down more than 50 houses.

While the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri have been in an official state of emergency since May 2021, this was the first known ISCAP attack in Tshopo, raising concerns that anti-Christian violence is spreading.

More than 5,500 people have been killed by ISCAP in Christian-majority DRC since 2017.

Pray for those who mourn loved ones lost in Islamist attacks in north-eastern DRC. Ask God to enable them to know His constant presence and grow strong in faith (Deuteronomy 31:6). Pray that bereaved Christians and those made homeless will be guided as to how to rebuild their lives by the One who is full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Pray for a solution to be found to the long-running violence, that Christians can live in peace, and that even the militants will understand the real meaning of God’s grace and turn to Him in repentance.

Pakistan – Two sisters face “blasphemy” charge in latest anti-Christian incident

Please uphold in prayer two Pakistani sisters, both Christians, who have been charged with “blasphemy” following an unsubstantiated accusation made by one of their neighbours.

Sonia and Saima, from Toba Tek Singh District, Punjab, were charged with “blasphemy” on 7 August following a complaint by local Muslim man Mohammad Haider.

Haider claimed that he had seen some pages of the Quran in a bag of rubbish that Sonia threw out on 6 August. After he and two other men went to her house the next day to investigate, they alleged that Sonia’s sister Saima, who also lives there, made some inappropriate comments that led Haider to report both sisters to the police for “blasphemy”.

Sonia and Saima were arrested and charged under section 295-B of the Pakistan Penal Code for “wilful defilement, damage or desecration of the Quran”. This section of the law requires a life sentence for those found guilty.

Before the arrest Haider informed others about what he had seen, and a large crowd gathered demanding legal action and threatening Sonia and Saima.

Accusations of “blasphemy” against Christians or other religious minorities can quickly turn into mob violence and riots. Families, and even entire communities of Christians, are at risk of being attacked.

Naveed Walter, president of Human Rights Focus Pakistan (HRFP), said, “Christians don’t feel safe and secure in their own country just because they are a minority. Being a minority should not deprive anyone of their rights.”

Lift up in prayer Sonia and Saima, asking that they will be released from prison and that God will protect them from further harm at the hands of extremists. Pray that the sisters and those close to them will continue to call on the Lord in truth and sense His nearness (Psalm 145:18). Ask the Lord to watch over the

Christian community in Toba Tek Singh, who are now at higher risk of attack. Pray that God will turn even these unsubstantiated accusations of “blasphemy” in Pakistan, which man means for evil, to His good purposes (Romans 8:28).

Bangladesh – Christian leaders seek assurances after national unrest leaves minorities vulnerable

Christians in Muslim-majority Bangladesh are among those vulnerable amid the political unrest that has swept across the country.

A Barnabas Aid contact has reported that Christian schools have been attacked, along with homes belonging to Christians. The homes of Hindus, Hindu-run businesses, and temples have also been targeted.

These attacks have been carried out by Islamist extremists who have joined with the anti-government protesters.

The student-led protests began peacefully on 1 July 2024 but turned violent around two weeks later. On 5 August Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country after 15 years in power. The following day economist Muhammad Yunus was announced as leader of an interim government.

On 13 August Christian leaders handed a letter to Yunus at his official residence in the capital Dhaka urging the interim government to ensure ethnic and religious minorities face no deprivation, injustice or oppression.

Pray for peaceful resolution to the civil and political unrest in Bangladesh. Ask that extremists will not have further opportunities to attack minority groups, and that the Lord will especially protect Christians from harm (2 Thessalonians 3:3).

food.gives – Northern Ireland warehouse opens

The opening of a new 2,500 sq ft warehouse in County Down, Northern Ireland, in June greatly increases the capacity of Barnabas to ship much-needed aid to our suffering Christian family around the world.

Since food.gives Ireland operations began in 2022, more than 32 tonnes of donations from generous supporters have been forwarded to our warehouse in Swindon, south-west England, for onward transportation.

The launch of the warehouse in Northern Ireland speeds up the distribution process, as we will shortly be able to ship aid directly from the island of Ireland to our brothers and sisters around the world.

Praise God for this vital new facility. Pray that He will guide His servants to use it effectively to maximise the distribution of aid from Ireland across the world. Pray that many lives will be blessed by the operations at the new warehouse.

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

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