

Prayer Focus Update

HOPE AND AID FOR THE PERSECUTED CHURCH **Prayer Focus** | Update Number 336 | **November 2024**

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

– John 16:33

A monthly resource for individuals and prayer groups
produced by Barnabas Aid.

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Pakistan – Two Sisters Acquitted of “Blasphemy”

Another huge answer to prayer has come as two sisters, both Christians, were acquitted two months after being charged with “blasphemy” in Toba Tek Singh District, Punjab, Pakistan (see *Prayer Focus Update*, September 2024).

Saima and Sonia were cleared by Toba Tek Singh Sessions court. On August 7 they were accused of throwing a bag containing wastepaper with pages of the Quran on abandoned land.

The sisters were arrested and charged under section 295-B of the Pakistan Penal Code for “willful defilement, damage or desecration of the Quran.” This section of the law carries a mandatory life sentence for those convicted.

Both women had strenuously denied the accusations, insisting they were not involved in the incident. Their lawyer, Advocate Chaudhry Haneef Hameed Mithu, said that the case had been fabricated to settle personal grudges.

The court granted release to the two sisters after considering evidence supplied by the district police officer. Local police and lower courts in Pakistan routinely accept the truth of “blasphemy” allegations, so it is notable that in this instance both police and court investigated properly.

Give thanks for the acquittal of Saima and Sonia. Pray that their release will serve as an example to deter those who would abuse Pakistan’s “blasphemy” laws to accuse Christians and other vulnerable people without cause. Pray for protection for the sisters, their family and other Christians from any retaliation following this verdict. Ask that God will empower His people in Pakistan to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21).

Iran – Two Christians Released Early from Ten-Year Sentences

Prayers have been answered as two Iranian Christians were each released early from ten-year prison sentences.

Iranian-Armenian pastor Anooshavan Avedian, 62, was acquitted and released from prison on September 24, one year into his ten-year sentence (see *Prayer Focus Update*, November 2023).

Anooshavan was arrested in August, 2020, for leading an unofficial church, also known as a “house church”, in Tehran. He was summoned to begin his ten-year jail sentence on September 18 2023.

The “house church” was deemed to be intent on disrupting national security “through educational and propaganda activities contrary to and disturbing to the holy religion of Islam.”

The most recent of several petitions for a retrial was accepted in April, 2024. The decision to acquit Anooshavan was made by Branch 21 of the Appeal Court of Iran.

The “house church” pastored by Anooshavan was started when the forced closure of a Farsi (Persian)-speaking church in 2013 left the congregants with nowhere to meet for worship.

Unlike the historic Armenian- and Assyrian-speaking Christian communities, Farsi-speaking Christians are converts from Islam – that is, apostates – and therefore punishable according to Islamic law.

Just five days after Anooshavan’s release, an Iranian Christian convert from Islam was also released from a ten-year prison term after the same Tehran appeal court reduced his sentence.

Mehdi Akbari, known as Yasser, was set free on Sunday, September 29 after his sentence was reduced to four years and five months. Yasser had already served a term of four years and nine months. He had made five applications for a retrial.

Yasser was sentenced in November, 2020, along with three other Christians under the same charge of “acting against national security by forming a house church.”

During his imprisonment, Yasser, who was a single parent, learned of the death of his only son, 18-year-old Amir Ali from underlying health issues. Yasser was informed too late to attend the funeral.

Praise God for the release from prison of Anooshavan and Yasser and that the light of His justice has shone (Isaiah 51:4). Pray that both men will recover from the ordeal experienced and know the Lord’s guidance and wisdom as they adjust to life outside prison again. Ask that other Christians in Iran who are imprisoned for their faith in Jesus will also be released. Pray that the Lord will continue to watch over Iranian believers, and that He will give them the courage and hope to persevere in their faith even amid persecution.

Sudan – Displaced Christians Arrested Amid Ongoing Conflict

The arrest of a group of 95 Christians in Sudan in the first week of October shows how precarious their situation is in the war-torn country.

The group – comprising 16 men, 25 women and 54 children – were arrested by members of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) in River Nile State, northern Sudan. The Christians, from the Nuba minority ethnic group, had been forced to flee fighting in Khartoum, the Sudanese capital.

The women and children are reported to have been released. At the time of writing, it is not clear if any of the men have been set free.

SAF forces supposedly held them on suspicion of collaborating with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the other party in the civil war that began in April, 2023.

Both sides have targeted ethnic and religious minorities during the conflict, carrying out multiple attacks on church leaders and church buildings. Churches have been looted or used as military bases, and several have been burned down.

Many Christians are among the 2.3 million Sudanese who have fled to neighboring countries and 2.2 million who have been internally displaced.

Sudan's Christian minority, estimated at 3% of the population, faced severe persecution for decades until the ousting of Omar al-Bashir's Islamist government in April, 2019.

An estimated 1.5 million people are at risk of famine or already experiencing famine, as a result of Sudan's civil war

Pray that our brothers and sisters, who may have suffered abuse and ill-treatment during their imprisonment, will recover from their ordeal, and that any still being held will be released. Ask the Lord to guide and protect displaced Christians in Sudan and those who are refugees abroad (Psalm 32:7). Pray for a peaceful resolution to the ongoing conflict that will allow Sudan's humanitarian needs to be met.

D.R. Congo – At Least 28 Christians Killed by Islamists in Multiple Attacks

Our brothers and sisters in the north-eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) urgently need our prayers. At least 28 were killed by Islamists in several attacks in late September and early October.

The incidents were announced on the social media channels of Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP, also known as the Allied Democratic Forces).

ISCAP reported that near the village of Anditongo, in Ituri province, on October 3 "Caliphate soldiers captured 15 Christians ... and killed them by slaughter, and praise be to God." The Islamists also

announced the killing of three others and the burning of three houses in another village on the same day.

Similar social media posts had followed earlier atrocities. Eight were killed in two armed assaults on Lubero, in the neighboring province of North Kivu, on Sunday, September 22.

“The soldiers of the Caliphate attacked the Christian village of Bandolo,” stated one of the posts, “and slaughtered five Christians, praise be to God.”

The other described Islamist fighters killing three Christians in the village of Medidi as well as burning homes and shops.

On the same Sunday another Christian was captured and killed by ISCAP in Ituri. Four days later, in the same province, the Islamists announced that they had ambushed “Christians who were riding motorcycles,” killing one and injuring two others.

ISCAP has been responsible for the deaths of more than 100 Christians in just the last three months. It is estimated that they have killed more than 5,500 Christians in north-eastern DRC since 2017.

Cry out to the Lord for our DRC brothers and sisters who are suffering from these repeated Islamist attacks. Ask that the bereaved will be comforted by His loving presence and the witness of His Spirit that their loved ones gave up their lives for name of Jesus and have passed to their reward (Matthew 16:25). Pray that He will instill in them such a spirit of perseverance that they know their service is advancing God’s kingdom, whatever they endure. Pray that the response of God’s people will expose the deceit that those who kill His children believe they are offering service to God (John 16:2).

Lebanon – Christians Forced to Flee as Middle East Conflict Intensifies

Please redouble your prayers for our brothers and sisters in Lebanon.

Thousands of Lebanese Christians are displaced, forced to flee their villages in the south to seek relative safety further north.

Many others – including church leaders – have stayed behind in the conflict zone, determined to stop their homes, churches and historic Christian lands from falling into the hands of Islamists.

Christians (around a third of the population), like many Lebanese people, do not support the Hezbollah terrorist group. “We consider them the oppressors,” said a Barnabas Aid project partner.

Camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in some areas of the north are run by Hezbollah. There are fears that any aid distributed through local government will not reach Christians. Churches in Christian-majority areas are struggling to cope with the influx of IDPs.

Those who have remained in the south expect no humanitarian assistance from institutions controlled by Hezbollah. Residents in Christian villages in the south are already facing desperate shortages.

Lebanon’s Christians have endured poverty for many years. Since the Port of Beirut explosion in 2020 the Lebanese economy has collapsed. Food and medicine have become almost unaffordable.

Lift up our brothers and sisters in Lebanon to the Lord. Pray that He will direct their steps (Proverbs 16:9), whether to move to safer areas or remain. Pray for the safe arrival of aid, especially to areas most affected by the conflict. Pray that the conflict will not interfere with the supply of blankets, warm clothes and fuel as winter closes in and temperatures fall.

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

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