

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

JAN-MAR 2020

voice

of Persecuted Christians



**PERSECUTED
CHRISTIANS
IN FLIGHT**

*News, stories and prayer requests
from persecuted Christians around the world*



Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

**Fleeing from
persecution
and conflict**

At the end of 2018, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency UNHCR¹, 70.8 million people had been forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations.

Of these, 25.9 million were refugees and 41.3 million internally displaced people. The agency noted with concern that 13.6 million were newly displaced – equivalent to an average of 37,000 people being forced to flee their homes every day.

‘What we are seeing in these figures is further confirmation of a longer-term rising trend in the number of people needing safety from war, conflict and persecution,’ said Filippo Grandi, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

As you can read in this edition of our magazine, many persecuted Christians have also been forced to flee for their lives – and continue to do so.

In **Iraq**, for example, more than 100,000 refugees are expected to arrive in Kurdistan in the coming year (page 10), while tens of thousands of Christians are being displaced by ongoing persecution in **Nigeria** (page 16). The repression of Christians in **Iran**, especially church leaders, continues to force a number to escape to neighbouring Turkey (page 6).

In addition, our annual summary of persecution trends (page 11) identifies several regions where partners will be facing ongoing persecution throughout the coming year.

Thanks to the faithful prayers of many and your loyal financial support, we are committed to helping our partners in all these situations throughout 2020.

Please join with me in praying that God will enable persecuted believers to stand firm in their faith ‘by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony’ (Revelation 12:11).



Recycle this magazine: share it with a friend!



¹ Global Trends: forced displacement in 2018, UNHCR, 2019.

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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

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Release helps Christians in the UK and Ireland to actively engage with their persecuted brothers and sisters around the world: praying with them, standing with them, helping them, and learning lessons of true Christian discipleship with them.

Release International: PO Box 54, Orpington BR5 4RT T: 01689 823491 E: info@releaseinternational.org

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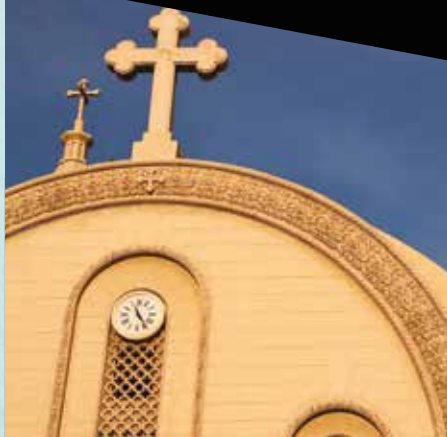


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Faith under fire



Coptic family attacked

A Coptic Christian, identified as Shinoda Aziz, is in critical condition after he, his mother and brother were stabbed in Egypt in November.

Local residents told Egyptian news media that a non-Christian with a criminal reputation assaulted the family members with a dagger after saying that, as Christians, they were not allowed to sit in front of their house in Nassiriya village, near Beni Mazar, Minya Governorate.

• *Pray for healing for the injured family.*

Sign up to Release



Photo: China Aid

PRAY FOR WANG YI

Please pray for Wang Yi, leader of China's Early Rain Covenant Church, who was arrested in December 2018. He has been charged with 'inciting subversion of state power' and 'illegal business operations' – charges that could lead to a prison sentence of up to 15 years. As Voice magazine went to press, he was still awaiting trial. Pray for his release.

Christian suffers among detained Uyghurs in China



Leaked documents from China have exposed the reality of massive detention camps for Uyghur Muslims. It's claimed these are places of brainwashing and even torture, where a million or more Uyghurs have been rounded up and held.

This network of detention camps was exposed on BBC's *Panorama* and in *The Guardian* newspaper. One former inmate said she faced constant video surveillance, brainwashing and electric shocks.

But it's not only Uyghur Muslims who suffer persecution.

Among Uyghurs targeted for brainwashing is Alimujiang Yimiti (pictured), a Uyghur Christian from a Muslim background. He was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment in 2009 for allegedly leaking state secrets to a foreigner.

His charge and conviction were based on two private conversations with an American friend. Despite the charge and stiff prison sentence, there is no evidence to suggest those conversations included any sensitive information.



Hear Release partner Bob Fu of China Aid describe how Uyghur Christians are being persecuted today at releaseinternational.org/latest.

• *Pray that Alimujiang will be released from prison, and that God will give strength to him and his family.*

Five Indian believers freed from jail

After spending 11 years behind bars for a murder they did not commit, five Christians in eastern India were finally ordered to be freed in November.

The Supreme Court of India issued a decision granting bail to the five Christians from Odisha (formerly Orissa) state falsely accused of killing Hindu leader Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati. His death in 2008 ignited anti-Christian attacks that killed 120 people, destroyed nearly 6,000 homes and displaced 55,000 believers.

Because the Supreme Court issued the release on bail, the five Christians and two others freed earlier this year do not have to return, unless the court itself so orders.

Buddhadev Nayak, Bhaskar Sunamajhi, Durjo Sunamajhi, Sanatan Badamajhi and Munda Badamajhi were convicted in 2008. They were arrested along with Gornath Chalanseth and Bijaya Sanaseth, who were also convicted but managed to obtain bail in May and July respectively.

'I am really happy that all of them are granted bail,' said lawyer Anupradha Singh, who represented the Christians. 'The judges granted bail on the grounds that they have spent over ten years in jail. Their behaviour in jail was also good.'

• Pray for healing and provision for the five men and their families.

Kazakh pastors jailed



A policeman is filmed during a previous raid on New Life church in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Photo: YouTube.

Three self-exiled pastors given long jail terms in July in absentia for leading a Pentecostal church in Kazakhstan's commercial capital Almaty lost their appeal in November. The three have said they will appeal to the supreme court.

The pastors were variously accused of founding the New Life Pentecostal Church in 1991 with 'criminal intent' and to cause 'psychological harm,' reported Forum 18 news.

Pastor Maxim Maximov was sentenced to five years' imprisonment, and his wife Pastor Larisa Maximova and Pastor Sergei Zaikin each to four years.

Currently some 850 people attend the church's various services in Almaty each Sunday.

• Pray that God will provide for these pastors and will strengthen His church in Almaty.

Christian family escapes mob

A pastor and his family in north-east India had a narrow escape when Christian villagers managed to head off a violent attack by extremists.

The mob brandishing swords, bricks and rods were minutes away from reaching the family after smashing their way into their home in Bihar state and threatening to kill them.

Pastor Palathingal Johnson called for help using his mobile phone and a crowd of about 50 Christians in the Rajasan area of Vaishali district responded immediately. The mob realised they were outnumbered and fled. The pastor had earlier called the police but could not get through.

The attackers, of whom there were between ten and 15, shouted Hindu slogans as they smashed windows and broke in through the roof. Thankfully the family managed to barricade themselves into one room until help arrived.

'That moment I could see death face to face,' says Pastor Palathingal. 'A delay of two more minutes would have cost us our lives. We constantly kept on chanting, "There is victory in the blood of Christ.'"

• Please pray that God will comfort and protect Pastor Palathingal, his wife and their four children.



Don't miss our new monthly audio podcast - available from releaseinternational.org/ podcast or through your favourite podcast app.

These audio programmes include interviews with international partners, discussions with staff, book reviews and other engaging items to help you hear the voice of our persecuted brothers and sisters.

Latest episodes include:

- Partner Waseem and Release worker Imtiaz discuss the challenges facing prisoners of faith in **Pakistan****
- Following Jesus, no matter what: the inspiring testimonies of partners Peter and Hadassah from **South East Asia** (see page 15)**

CRACKDOWN IN IRAN

Increasing persecution by the Iranian authorities is forcing hundreds of believers to escape to neighbouring Turkey, reports Release's Tom Hardie.

Morteza, who came to faith in Christ in 2005, had a small but successful office equipment business in the ancient Iranian port city of Bandar Mahshahr. Arezou, his future wife, an Arab who also came from the southwest of the country, was disillusioned in her quest to find Allah – instead she also encountered Christ and committed her life to Him.

The couple met and all was going well. They had even started running a house church, which grew to over 40 members – and were married in Release's partners' training centre in Armenia.

But then one day their world changed dramatically.

Identified by officials, they were called in by the state's intelligence

agency on March 2, 2010 (their first wedding anniversary) and were threatened with sexual abuse. They were interrogated on four separate occasions.

Morteza was also threatened many times by unknown individuals and every day life became harder – especially after his business was closed down.

Threats

During their final interrogation in 2011 threats of sexual abuse were again made so after Morteza's release from prison they felt there was no alternative but to leave their home and belongings and flee to Turkey.



Iranians celebrate the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

our partner Lazarus Yeghnazar at 222 Ministries. *'Christians can survive if they keep their mouths shut and read their Bible under a blanket, but have you ever met a new believer who can keep their mouth shut after coming to faith!*

'There are some we tell to be more careful about how they share but they cannot. They have decided to stay, despite the risks. They are bold, courageous, and yes, beautiful even!'

'Hundreds are fleeing in desperation. They realise that if they stay their lives will be in danger.'

He added: *'But sometimes it is equally courageous to flee. We have had severe persecution of Christians which has increased over the past four years. If a Muslim is baptised into Christ he or she can end up in prison for a year, while the person who performs the baptism can be jailed for four to five years!'*

Christian parents wanting to bring up their children in the faith face an additional challenge – pupils at school are required to recite the Koran in front of their class.

'If a child, say an eight-year-old boy, refuses to read the Koran aloud because he is a Christian, there comes

a slap on the face. Then the parents are called and accused.'

So not surprisingly believers are fleeing Iran.

Lazarus told me: *'I call it the forced exodus of the Christian community. Hundreds are fleeing in desperation. They realise that if they stay their lives will be in danger, and it's worth the risk to provide safety for their children and an environment in which they can grow and learn in peace.'*

'The only reason the numbers are not increasing is that the West has pretty much closed its doors to asylum seekers from the Middle East. And those who are granted asylum, bizarrely, are more likely to be Muslims than Christians. Some Christians have been waiting eight years in Turkey to get asylum to the West.'

'The regime has forced out church leaders to such an extent that 99 per cent of Iran's church leadership is outside the country'

He estimates that, of those he is connected to, in the past ten years just over 300 have been granted asylum out of the thousands who have fled Iran.

Continued overleaf..

Theirs is not a rare experience for Christians in Iran where anyone who is perceived to challenge or criticise the ruling regime is a potential target for arrest and detention.

Corruption, poverty, inequality and ecological disaster have blighted the country during the past four decades of the Islamic Revolution – but growing unrest and economic decline are causing many Iranians, including Christians, to flee.

What is driving many believers to leave is also the relentless persecution of the church.

'Anyone is safe in Iran as long as they don't challenge the ruling elite,' said



Morteza and Arezou have been blessed with twin girls.

Within the republic itself, in its attempt to eradicate Christianity, the regime has forced out church leaders to such an extent that 99 per cent of Iran's church leadership is outside the country.

Lazarus told me: *'Church ministers are given the option: "Go to jail, leave Iran or spy for us!" Yes, can you imagine – spy for the Iranian regime! Of course, they cannot so they leave the country. That means that just one per cent are able to shepherd the flock face to face – but that is not as dire as it first seems.*

'Thanks to the technological advances of the past few years, the church – somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 committed disciples of Christ (out of a larger number who have made some expression of faith over the past 20 years) – is getting fed from abroad. Twenty years ago that was impossible, but today the church has some amazing tools at its disposal.'

Which is just as well because Lazarus believes that Iran is on course for a major crisis.

'It is heading the same way as Syria did. Whether it will mean internal unrest or civil war or something from outside we don't know, but it will come. Ultimately, however, I believe it will be positive for Iran. I believe it can become an open nation.'

For Morteza and Arezou, escaping Iran was not the end of their story.

Since being in Turkey more than 300 people have been baptised through their ministry!

However, life has not been easy for them, even outside their former homeland.

Their acceptance for asylum by the US was halted when the American administration changed its immigration policy, leaving them in limbo. They were also heartbroken when Arezou miscarried their first child eight weeks into the pregnancy. But God has also blessed them and they can see His hand in everything. They now have twin girls!

The needs in Turkey among the Christian community are great: as well as meeting the physical necessities of people who have often left everything behind, there is also a desperate requirement for social workers and counsellors for people who have suffered trauma such as rape victims.

'We have needs now, but if a calamity strikes and thousands of believers flee into Turkey the church will capsize,' says Lazarus.

'We don't have the capacity to cope and an influx of Christians would not be tolerated by the local authorities. We need to be ready to cope in these circumstances. The church in general is good at responding and praying when things happen – but not so good at preparing for emergencies.

'Please pray for Christians in Iran but also in places like Turkey. They have often left a huge amount behind but also they come with problems, sometimes having suffered great trauma.'

Go and pray!

Surprisingly perhaps, given UK media coverage of Iran, Lazarus also encourages Christians in the UK to actually visit the country.

'Iranians love tourists and westerners and are a very hospitable people. If you can go, go. Be sensible, but go and pray in your head on the streets. I would love to flood Iran with 10,000 believers from the UK out there praying. If you remember, Jesus took a boat ride with the disciples to the demoniac in the Gadarenes to cast out the demons. He didn't deliver the man from far away!

'Only six months ago the Iranian Minister of Health said that a quarter of the population are clinically depressed! There is a deep hunger for the truth and for freedom in Iran. Of course, we can't all go but we must pray, whether that's through being there in person or by "travelling there through prayer".'





Population: 83 million

Capital: Tehran

Government: Theocratic republic

Religion: Muslim 95.9%, Christian 1.6%, Other 2.5%

Sources: Operation World, World Factbook.



PRAY FOR IRAN



- Pray for all believers enduring prison because of their faith in Christ.
- Pray for former prisoner Ebrahim Firouzi (pictured): following his release in October, he must now serve two years' internal exile far from his home.
- Pray for Release partners as they give practical support to persecuted Christians inside Iran – as well as those who have fled to Turkey.

If you would like further information to enable you to pray for Iran and Iranian Christians please contact www.222ministries.org



YOUR OPPORTUNITY TO HELP PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS IN FLIGHT

Around the world persecution and conflict are forcing Christians to leave their homes and flee as refugees.

These precious believers and their families need your prayers and gifts to survive – and to rebuild their lives.

Your gift could provide:

- emergency aid to vulnerable families
- Christian discipleship and pastoral care
- vocational training to help believers start small businesses
- trauma-healing for the victims of violence

Please stand with your persecuted Christian family today. To make a gift:

- use the enclosed form
- call 01689 823491
- give online at releaseinternational.org



IRAQI CHRISTIANS SET TO FLEE

Renewed conflict in Syria and insecurity in Iraq may force another exodus of Iraqi Christians, warns partner Jamal. By Release's Andrew Boyd.

Only around 300,000 Christians remain in Iraq from a peak of 1.8 million in the year 2000. They've been driven out by conflict and insecurity. And many more are now anxious to leave, says Release's partner Jamal.

'Most of the Christians have lost hope,' he says. 'Many of them are applying to leave the country, and if they can, they will.'

Jamal provides help to Iraqis who have fled to Erbil, the principal city of Kurdistan, in northern Iraq. He fears that the recent Turkish incursion into neighbouring Syria is threatening to drive a new wave of refugees into the region.

'The Kurdistan government are preparing for between 100,000 and 200,000 refugees,' he recently told Release. 'They're preparing for a big number to come.'

The US decision to take their troops out of the north has left many Kurds feeling betrayed.

'They believe it has given the Turks the right to invade the Kurdish area in Syria. Many people have been killed. This has impacted Kurdistan because even more refugees are now coming. Everybody's confused and shocked by the decision.'

Many Iraqis have already fled to Erbil, where the Kurds have given them safe haven. Some 50,000 others are said to be scattered across the plains of Nineveh, in towns and villages near Mosul, until recently occupied by Islamic State (IS).

Some Iraqis have been refugees several times over – driven out by the Gulf War, insurgency and IS fighters. *'For the last hundred years they have been under attack,' he says. 'They have lost hope. They have lost the desire to rebuild again.'*

The recent death of IS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is unlikely to allay the Christian community's growing fears. *'If IS is finished today, then another movement with a different*

name is likely to replace it. That's why the Christians want to leave.'

Thanks to your support, Jamal is working with the Christian community in Kurdistan to support refugees – with the blessing of the Kurdistan government.

'The government saw the impact of what we were doing – and asked us to do more. They have given us an open door to reach refugees, and permission to distribute food and Christian books everywhere we go.'

'Please pray for our protection and the continuing favour of God to help the refugees and displaced people in the region.'



DON'T MISS JAMAL'S SPEAKING TOUR

See page 21 for how you can hear Jamal for yourself on his tour in the spring.

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2020

Key partners report on the pressures they are likely to face in 2020



Military parade in North Korea.



AFRICA

NIGERIA

'In 2020 Christians are likely to suffer continuing attacks by Fulani herdsmen militia in the Middle Belt region and Boko Haram Islamic terrorist group attacks in the north-east,' reports Paul, who works with Release partner Ben Kwashi, the Archbishop of Jos.

'Persecution is increasing and most of it is not reported due to government intimidation because the government and security forces want to prove that they are in control and winning the war against terrorism,' he said.

'Meanwhile thousands of Christians have been displaced by Fulani herdsmen in Plateau state – and their homes taken over. Some have been living in camps for up to five years!'

He added: *'The killings by Fulani herdsmen will most certainly continue in 2020 because there is no will by the*

government to stop the land-grabbing, nor to return displaced Christians to their homelands and provide security.

'Boko Haram still controls many communities which include a large number of Christians.

'So attacks by them will continue since this radical Islamic sect is still very active,' added Paul.

ERITREA

More than 600 evangelical Christians remain detained without trial inside repressive Eritrea where all evangelical and pentecostal churches were banned in 2002. At least 170 believers have suffered more than ten years in jail in appalling conditions – despite appeals for their release by the international community. In the coming year, repression, forced conscription and economic crisis will force many Eritreans to flee as refugees.

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EASTERN ASIA



CHINA

'The persecution of Christians in China has been rising since 2018, when China imposed tough new religious restrictions,' says Release CEO Paul Robinson.

'Freedom of faith is guaranteed under Article 36 of the Chinese constitution. But in practice, the authorities bulldoze churches, tear down crosses and imprison pastors. Lawyers who speak up for them in the courts simply disappear. And it's getting worse.'

'It used to be just the unofficial churches that were targeted, but today China is

pulling down state-registered churches and persecuting their pastors too.'

The authorities have banned Christians from holding prayer meetings in their homes. Hosts risk having their houses demolished or taken from them. China has also banned Christians from sharing religious messages with anyone under the age of 18.

Authorities are even installing face-recognition cameras in churches to spy on congregations and preachers – ensuring that persecution will continue in 2020.



NORTH KOREA

'The zero-tolerance policy of the government means that Christianity is incompatible with life and citizenship in North Korea,' said Dr Eric Foley, CEO of our associate ministry Voice of the Martyrs Korea.

'Any North Korean suspected even of having contact with a foreign missionary, such as from China, would

be interned at a concentration camp, along with family members extending to three generations.'

'The policy against Christians has remained steady since at least the 1950s – and is arguably the longest, harshest persecution of Christians in recorded history.'

For these reasons, Christians inside North Korea will continue to experience severe repression in 2020.

'Even so, the North Korean underground church is believed to be growing at a faster rate than the church in the UK or almost anywhere in the West,' said Dr Foley.

SOUTH ASIA



AFGHANISTAN

It is dangerous for an Afghan citizen to convert to Christianity – ensuring that Christians will continue to face extreme pressure from both the authorities and militants in the next 12 months.

Despite these pressures one partner told us: *'We are grateful that together we can be part of seeing God build His church among the Afghan people.'*

INDIA

Following the landslide victory of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) in May 2019, Christians and other minorities fear that Hindu nationalism and



China is building a vast surveillance system to monitor citizens, including Christians meeting in churches.



Narendra Modi

religious intolerance will continue to grow during 2020.

Hindu extremists attacked churches and individual believers throughout 2019, and this is likely to continue in 2020. Since the BJP took power in 2014, there has been a significant rise in the number of attacks against Christians.

According to the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), Christians endured 218 incidents of religiously motivated violence during the first ten months of 2019 – the majority of these allegedly by vigilante mobs. In 2014, 147 incidents of religiously motivated violence against Christians were documented.

PAKISTAN

‘Christians in Pakistan are a marginalised community and deprived of equal rights,’ said one Release partner. *‘They are facing discrimination at all levels, and in all walks of life, on a daily basis.’*

‘The blasphemy laws continue to be widely misused against Christians – often to settle personal scores,’ he added.

‘Christian girls have been kidnapped, raped, converted to Islam and forced to marry their abductors. The issue of the forced conversion of Christian and Hindu women has surfaced time and again in the national media – but there has been no serious effort to address the issue by any ruling government.’

Given these trends, Christians in Pakistan will continue to face persecution and discrimination in 2020.

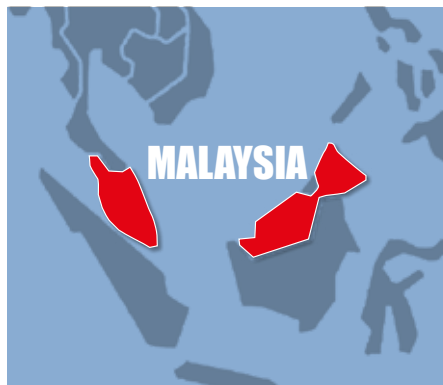
SRI LANKA

Religious and ethnic minorities have been concerned since Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka’s Defence Secretary from 2005 to 2015, was elected president in November 2019.

‘We knew right from the beginning that the Sinhala Buddhists of this country will be behind my victory,’ said Rajapaksa.

The Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), an extreme Buddhist nationalist group, allegedly enjoyed the protection of his brother’s previous regime. Thus minorities, including Christians, fear that attacks by such extremists will grow in the coming year.

SOUTH-EAST ASIA



MALAYSIA

While Malaysia’s constitution guarantees religious freedom, Sharia (Islamic law) often supersedes it. It is illegal to evangelise Malays, and apostasy laws make conversion illegal in all but one Malaysian state.

As a result, *‘many believers from a Muslim background are in hiding,’* says one Release partner. Churches have been monitored by the government.

‘The underground church has increased and your prayers have helped us to have the courage to continue – despite the fear some have felt,’ added our partner.

In these circumstances, Christian converts in Malaysia will continue to face discrimination in 2020.

CENTRAL ASIA

‘Throughout Central Asia, Christians are under pressure from both government and society,’ said one Release partner. *‘In many states in the region, believers have no opportunity to share their faith publicly, and authorities often oppose the registration of new churches.’*

These policies reflect an increasingly aggressive attitude towards Christians by Muslim society, said our partner.

‘The greatest aggression is manifested against those people who were previously Muslims, who accepted the gospel and became Christians. They are considered as traitors to their people and state. They are often openly called the agents of Western countries.’

‘According to Russian media, which are very influential in countries of the former Soviet Union, evangelical leaders are seen as spies of the West, with America and Great Britain regarded as the main enemies.’

In such conditions, Christians in Central Asia will continue to face discrimination in the coming year.

‘According to Russian media, evangelical leaders are seen as spies of the West, with America and Great Britain regarded as the main enemies.’



MIDDLE EAST



Thanks to your support, refugees in Kurdistan, northern Iraq, receive emergency aid.

EGYPT

Egypt is home to the fastest growing population in the Middle East and the largest Christian population in the Arab world: Christians number around 11 million people (13% of the population).

Despite protection offered by the constitution, the Christian minority in Egypt will continue to face discrimination and persecution during 2020. Most Christians live as second-class citizens.

Believers from a Muslim background face the harshest treatment, such as expulsion from their families, divorce instigated by their Muslim spouses, estrangement from their children and loss of employment.



IRAQ

While an estimated 1.8 million Christians lived in Iraq in the year 2000 – that number has dropped dramatically to around just 300,000 today.

‘They’ve been driven out by conflict and insecurity. And many more are now anxious to leave,’ said Release partner Jamal.

The death of Islamic State (IS) leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in October 2019, is unlikely to allay the Christian community’s growing fears. *‘If IS is finished today, then another movement with a different name is likely to replace it,’* said our partner.

In addition, the Turkish incursion into neighbouring Syria in October 2019 is likely to drive a new wave of refugees into Kurdistan in the north-east in the coming year.

Read more about Iraq on page 10.

IRAN

‘There is a campaign to stop the spread of Christianity, to arrest those who are leading house churches and those involved in evangelism and teaching,’ reports one Release partner.

‘Persecution is on the increase because the authorities are aware of the growth in the number of converts and house churches – and are determined at all costs to stem this. In fact, their overall goal is to exterminate the Persian-speaking church and only allow the Christian minority groups to operate.’

‘Christians are likely to face increasing pressures in 2020. The very fear of persecution is a worry as believers meeting in secret do not know if they are under surveillance or not. These pressures have led to a number of believers leaving Iran, mainly to Turkey – and this movement is likely to continue in 2020.’

See page 6 for more on Iran.

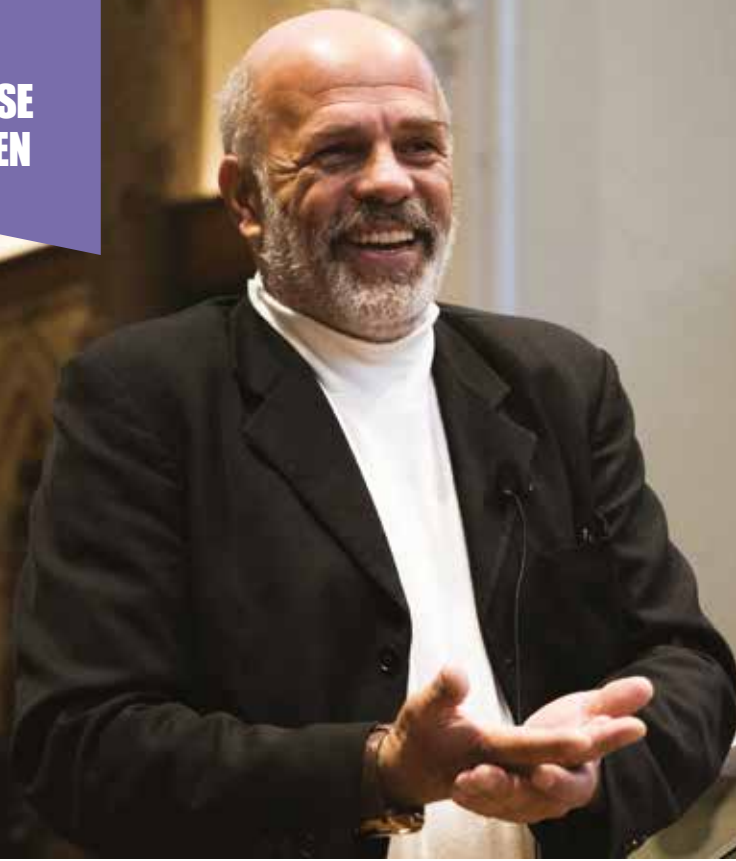
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www.releaseinternational.org info@releaseinternational.org
01689 823491 PO Box 54, Orpington BR5 9RT CC 280577 (SC 040456)

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‘My God is alive and working!’

... said partner Peter (pictured), from South East Asia, at our national Release Women conference.

When Peter converted to Christ many years ago, he lost everything in the space of just 24 hours. But today he can see how God was working out His plan and that the persecution he suffered now enables him, with his wife Hadassah, to minister to others in similar situations.

‘People are coming to Christ,’ he told the conference. ‘God is alive and working; people’s lives are being turned around.’

Hadassah told the conference of her painful conversion from a Muslim



Hadassah

background, which led to her being cut off from both her family and from any inheritance. When her father died and she wanted to pay her last respects to him, she was thrown out of the house. And yet, Hadassah said, the joy of the Lord remains precious to her.

Rejected

Men and women who convert to Christianity from other religions can often face this sort of rejection from family. They risk being ostracised from society and losing their jobs. Women are especially vulnerable since they are often divorced by their husbands and separated from their children. But when they love Jesus, it is a price they are willing to pay.

Peter and Hadassah today serve new believers in practical ways: helping them to find housing and employment, but also nurturing them in their Christian faith, teaching them how to pray and study the Bible.

Above all though, they try to show these new converts love: to show them that Jesus loves them – and that they love them.

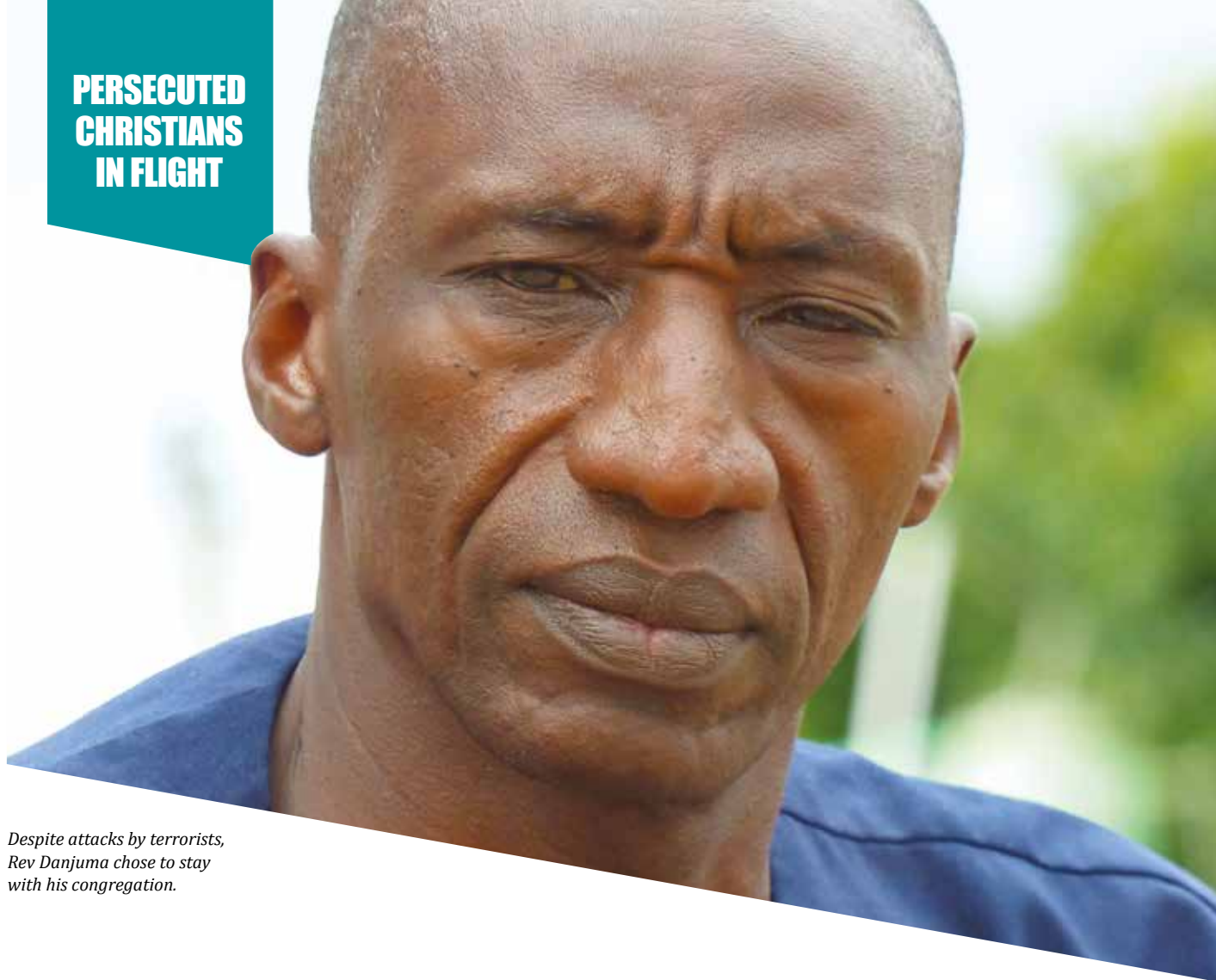
One girl found this particularly difficult to accept. She wasn’t used to being shown love, she was afraid, and she frequently ran away. Each time, however, Peter and Hadassah searched for her and brought her back.

Despite her fear, she loves Jesus and now she has a young son – and she wants him to love Jesus too.



LISTEN TO OUR NEW PODCAST

Hear more from Peter and Hadassah in our new audio podcast. Find it at releaseinternational.org/podcast or via your favourite podcast app.



Despite attacks by terrorists, Rev Danjuma chose to stay with his congregation.

STANDING STRONG

Attacks by terrorists in north east Nigeria have forced thousands of Christians to flee for their lives. Release's Kenneth Harrod recently spoke to some of those displaced – and saw first-hand how your support is helping believers stay strong in their faith.

When Boko Haram terrorists attacked his village in northern Borno State Rev Danjuma saw many of his congregation flee. But he remained.

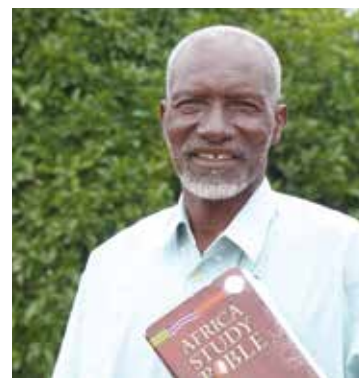
'I stayed with my people. To the last drop of my blood I can't run away – I am their pastor,' he told me. 'Only God sustains my life.'

Over the past decade once strong Christian communities in the north

east of Nigeria have been decimated by the Islamist terrorist group.

Churches have been destroyed and many Christians have fled, either further south or into the Borno capital of Maiduguri, which offers a measure of protection.

In Maiduguri many Christians live difficult lives in camps set up for internally displaced people, where they rely on support from various



Pastor Yakuba

non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for life's necessities.

Many are farmers – but farming on land just a few kilometres outside of Maiduguri is impossible because of the risk of attack. Yakubu, a pastor, told me: *'Many Christians are struggling because of poverty and fear of death, because no one is farming. If you try to*



Your support enables hard-pressed leaders in northern Nigeria to receive Bible teaching and encouragement at local conferences.



Rev Daniel

farm you might be killed. We want to go back to our area, but Boko Haram wants no Christians in the place. But by God's grace, we still hope to go back.'

Rev Daniel is one person who has been living in a camp for several years. Originally from the Gwoza area of Borno State, he was forced to flee when Boko Haram attacked his community. More than 150 people were killed in the attack, said Daniel, most of whom were men.

Three of his children, aged between 7 and 14, were shot dead. His father was beheaded. His wife was kidnapped and forcibly married to a Muslim.

I could see a deep sadness in his eyes – and yet a Christian resilience in everything he told me. *'Life is not easy*

in the camp. When the NGOs come we all survive,' he said. 'But I have surrendered my life to Christ.'

Pastor Simon fled to Maiduguri after terrorists attacked his village in the north of Borno, near the border with Chad. He told me: *'In 2012 Boko Haram started targeting Christians. In 2013 there was another attack. They attacked again in 2015. When they attacked in 2018 we escaped to Maiduguri.'*

Initially, many who fled were living in fear, traumatised and suffering from anxiety attacks. However, things are a little calmer now, Simon said. Last year a group of 11 Muslims came to faith in Christ, which was a



Andrewas

great encouragement to Christians in the camp.

Church elder Andrewas, also displaced by violence, told me: *'We are managing – but our biggest challenge is the education of our children. Please pray that we will stand firm in our faith.'*

I was in north east Nigeria to visit a Release partner who is working alongside displaced Christians. Their vision is to train, equip, support and encourage pastors in the north east, strengthening their faith, and encouraging them, despite these violent attacks, to continue to reach out with the saving power of the gospel.

Hard questions

This significant ministry began after terrorists attacked one community, killing over 50 people. *'One of the pastors expressed his frustration and inability to answer questions from the people about God's love and justice,'* our partner told me. *'I saw there was a great need to teach pastors in the community how to answer these questions of suffering and persecution.'*

Thanks to your support, conferences in the north east are now bringing together pastors, evangelists and church leaders for vital training, aimed at both sustaining churches and developing strategies for outreach.

'Thank you for giving us hope and skills to continue in our calling... Now I know nothing can stop the church'

After one of these meetings, a pastor from Maiduguri told our partner:

'Thank you for giving us hope and skills to continue in our calling. At first I was confused, without any hope for the church and missions in this area. Now I know and am confident that nothing can stop the church. I will work here and I will die here. I have no other work to do but to carry on the mission of Christ. If I get killed doing that, so be it.'

Continued overleaf..



Pastor Moses

During my visit I was privileged to participate in one of these conferences, where more than 200 pastors, elders and church leaders had gathered.

One of those attending was Pastor Moses, originally from Chad. He has been attacked by Boko Haram four times. Three years ago his wife Tabitha was killed in a bomb attack.

'But I am not afraid,' he told me. 'I pray to continue preaching the gospel.'

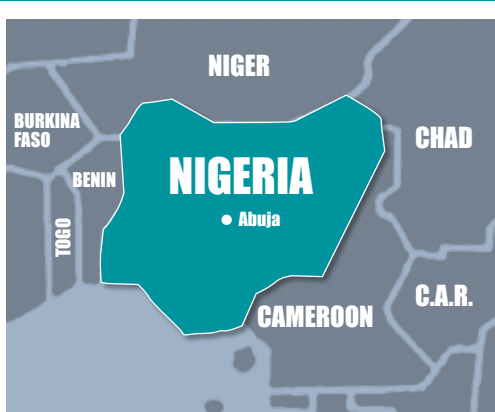
Danjuma, who spoke at the beginning of the conference, summed up the faith of these courageous believers who had gathered: *'I have faced so many challenges. I have lost some of my property. I have faced many threats. But God is faithful. We have many young people and we need to keep discipling new believers.'*



PLEASE PRAY

Please pray for this vital and strategic work in north east Nigeria that Release is supporting.

- **Pray that pastors will be encouraged to persevere in their ministry and will continue to serve Christ in the north east.**
- **Pray that, by God's grace, they will be effective in reaching out with the gospel.**
- **Pray for their on-going protection.**



Population: 203 million

Capital: Abuja

Government: Federal presidential republic

Religion: Christian 51%, Muslim 45%, Other 4%

Sources: Operation World, World Factbook.

NIGERIA

Fulani militants and Boko Haram terrorists have escalated their war of terror against Christians in northern and central Nigeria: attacking their communities and driving them from their homes.

'Things have gone from bad to worse in the Middle Belt since the beginning of the attacks in Jos in 2010 when several communities were attacked by Fulani herdsmen,' said one Nigerian partner.

'Thousands of churches have been attacked and destroyed, some at least three times. Thousands of Christians have been killed in the conflict between Islam and Christianity in Nigeria since its independence in 1960. Pastors and their families have been specifically targeted.'

'There is a deliberate plan to destroy and take over the predominantly Christian communities in the region,' he added.

In addition the terrorist group Boko Haram has targeted everything and everyone it views as being outside 'true Islam'. This includes not only Christians, whom the group has labelled 'infidels', but also secular schools and moderate Muslims.

Good News

WALK ON!

Congratulations to Rev Andrew and Elizabeth Procter who completed the Ultra Challenge Thames Path walk in September, raising more than £1,500 to support persecuted Christians through Release. Thank you so much for your wonderful effort!

See page 23 for details of this year's five Ultra Challenge walks: a great opportunity to enjoy fantastic scenery and help persecuted Christians at the same time. The walks range from 25 to 100 km, and you can participate as an individual, family or group.



FREEDOM FOR GOU ZHONGCAN



Praise God for the release of our Christian brother in China, Gou Zhongcan, who is affiliated with the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, Sichuan. Gou, who spent seven months in prison, refused to give authorities passwords to his computer and mobile phone. He had already spent ten years in prison for his human rights work. Please continue to pray for Early Rain Church members Pastor Wang Yi who is awaiting trial (see page 4), Qin Defu (recently sentenced to four years' imprisonment) and deacon Ge Yingfeng.

New home in Canada



We're delighted to report that Eritrean refugee Afewerki and his four children are now living safely in Canada. You may recall that Afewerki was forced to escape from repressive Eritrea in late 2017 after his wife Fekadu died in prison after being denied medical treatment.

'I know that my wife was a hero Christian, that she died for Christ,' he told us shortly after making the dangerous journey to one of the refugee camps for Eritreans in northern Ethiopia. While in the camp, Afewerki and his family received help from our partner.

Please pray for Afewerki and his children (from left) Susan, Saimon, Nftalem and Michias. Pray that God will meet all their needs as they establish their new life in Canada.

More than coffee



Hazaq founders Matthew (left) and Thor.

Enjoy a great-tasting coffee from start-up Hazaq – and help persecuted Christians at the same time. Development Manager James talked recently to Hazaq’s founders Thor and Matthew.

James: You both love coffee and came up with this idea to start a business. But you want it to be about more than just coffee. Why?

Thor: I enjoy a good coffee, but the whole coffee ‘experience’ has always been for me more about the human connection. We really want our business to be driven by a desire for freedom and fairness.

James: Is there a connection, specifically, between coffee and the persecution of Christians and why partner with Release?

Thor: It’s not exact, but there’s an overlap between the world map of Christian persecution and the world map of coffee-producing countries. The new Hazaq brand is all about using that geographic connection to share the stories of persecuted Christians from some of those places. When it comes to Release, the clue is in your tag line – voice of persecuted Christians.

We connect so strongly to your values that from the beginning we wanted to both raise awareness and make a contribution.

James: For all the coffee lovers out there, what kinds of coffee do you have?

Matthew: We do have a treat for coffee appreciators – to start with we have a bold, earthy bean from India, a bright floral bean from Ethiopia and an amazing strong rich continental blend. Check them out at HazaqCoffee.com. We’ll also be releasing several more down the line.

James: Why did you choose the name Hazaq?

Matthew: Hazaq is a Hebrew word which means ‘be bold and courageous’ or ‘stand strong.’ It comes up a lot in the first chapter of Joshua, for example. This idea ties in so well with our vision. We want people to buy our coffee as a

way of standing strong with those who stand strong in the face of persecution.

James: In two years from now, where do you want to be as a business?

Thor: A \$50 billion takeover deal from Starbucks, I guess! No seriously, we want Hazaq to be the coffee of every free-thinking Christian who cares about their fellow believers living under persecution. We want Hazaq to plant a flag in the minds of Western Christians – and remind us that we can use our freedom to do something good.



You can buy Hazaq Coffee at HazaqCoffee.com – 20 per cent of all profits go directly to Release.

 @HazaqC

READY, STEADY, BAKE!



Basbousa Cake Recipe Card

Basbousa cake is a traditional Middle Eastern yeast cake made from semolina, coconut, sugar and flour soaked in simple syrup. It is quick and easy to make. Basbousa is eaten by Coptic Christians in Egypt, and often baked during Lent and other times of fasting.

Take on the #FlourChallenge and try this recipe at home. We're sorry your church cannot do this cake and pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters who have been forced to flee. You could also organise a cake sale in your local church or prayer group to raise vital funds for Release projects.

www.releaseinternational.org

Join the hundreds of supporters who have already baked a delicious Middle Eastern Basbousa cake - and raised funds for persecuted Christians.

At our summer exhibitions last year we highlighted the needs of Christians in flight through our #FlourChallenge (releaseinternational.org/flour-challenge). Flour is often an essential part of the aid we provide to refugees.

Supporters who made a donation received a small bag of flour and a recipe card for this traditional cake. While we can't enclose the flour with the magazine,

we've given you the recipe card so you can join in!

You could invite friends round to share it and pray for persecuted Christians who have been forced to flee - perhaps also enjoying a cup of Hazaq coffee (see opposite). Or you could organise a cake sale to raise funds for Release projects. Happy baking!

release & your church



JAMAL'S SPEAKING TOUR



Release partner Jamal distributes aid at a refugee camp in northern Iraq.

Be inspired by hearing how your support is making a real difference for displaced Christian families in Kurdistan, northern Iraq.

Release partner Jamal (see page 10) will be sharing his experience of ministering to persecuted Christians in Iraq at a number of churches in the UK this spring. Don't miss out!

See our website releaseinternational.org/events for the latest information.

Invite a Release speaker to your church

To request a speaker for your church or fellowship group, please contact these numbers:

Ireland

Stephen on
028 9334 0014

London

Imtiaz on
07597 577041

Midlands & North

Kenneth on
07375 516408

Scotland

James on
07434 894016

South

Kenneth on
07375 516408

Wales & W Midlands

Paul on
07747 535588

Release Women

Laura on
01689 823491

Or call 01689 823491

THE WORD

Engaging the next generation is critical for the church, says Chioma, team leader of Release Potential.

BRINGING RADICAL CHANGE

Young people throughout the generations have often been at the forefront of radical change in the world.

This generation is no different. Globalisation and technology have made the world seem smaller with instant access to global news and information 24/7.

The ability to communicate with those on the other side of the world in real time using WhatsApp, Facetime, Skype, Zoom, Facebook etc has changed the way we keep in touch and interact with people. Accessible travel has also opened up the world like never before.

In addition, social media has amplified the voices of the marginalised and given young people a platform to make their voices heard in new ways. Think of teenager Greta Thunberg, the Swedish environmental activist, whose campaigning has gained international recognition.

Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani activist for female education, was awarded the Nobel peace prize in 2014 – she was just 17 years old.

In both the Old and New Testaments we find examples of how God works to empower the next generation, often through mentoring and discipleship. Elijah passes his mantle to Elisha, Jesus trains the 12, the apostle Paul nurtures his disciple Timothy (2 Timothy 1).

As a church it is important that we build relationships and invest in the next generation. That we create opportunities for young adults to use their skills – for many have a strong desire to serve and to make a difference.

We will need to be courageous and innovative, prepared to do things differently and to learn from the next generation.

We need to think forwards, for ‘The ultimate test of a moral society is the kind of world that it leaves to its children’ (a quote attributed to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the pastor and theologian who was martyred in Nazi Germany). Release Potential seeks to

make Christian young adults aware of persecution, speak out against it, and pray for and learn lessons of discipleship with our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world.

We want to help them grow in their understanding of both the beauty and the cost of following Jesus – and explain what this can look like in other countries, as well as in the UK.

Host a ‘Hidden’ event

If you have a youth or young adults church, why not invite Release Potential to host a ‘Hidden’ event? Through live music, testimonies and prayer we aim to give participants a taste of the experience of persecuted Christians. Please join us as we choose *‘to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God’* (Micah 6:8).

Check out our video and other resources:



ReleaseInternational

releaseinternational.org/release-potential

INSPIRING FAITH



‘The first Christians were persecuted by the Roman emperors, but in the end, Roman emperors became Christians.’

Pastor Richard Wurmbbrand was imprisoned for 14 years in communist Romania in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1968 he inspired the founding of Release, which today continues his ministry to serve persecuted Christians around the world in the name of Jesus.

GET READY FOR A GREAT WALKING CHALLENGE!

Enjoy fantastic scenery and raise vital funds for persecuted Christians on one of this year's walks.

June 27-28	COTSWOLD WAY	(Bath-Cheltenham)	100km
July 4-5	PEAK DISTRICT	(Bakewell-Bakewell)	100km
Aug 29-30	SOUTH COAST	(Eastbourne-Arundel)	100km
Sept 12-13	THAMES PATH	(Putney Bridge-Henley)	100km
Sept 12	THAMES BRIDGES	(Putney Bridge-Tower Bridge)	25km

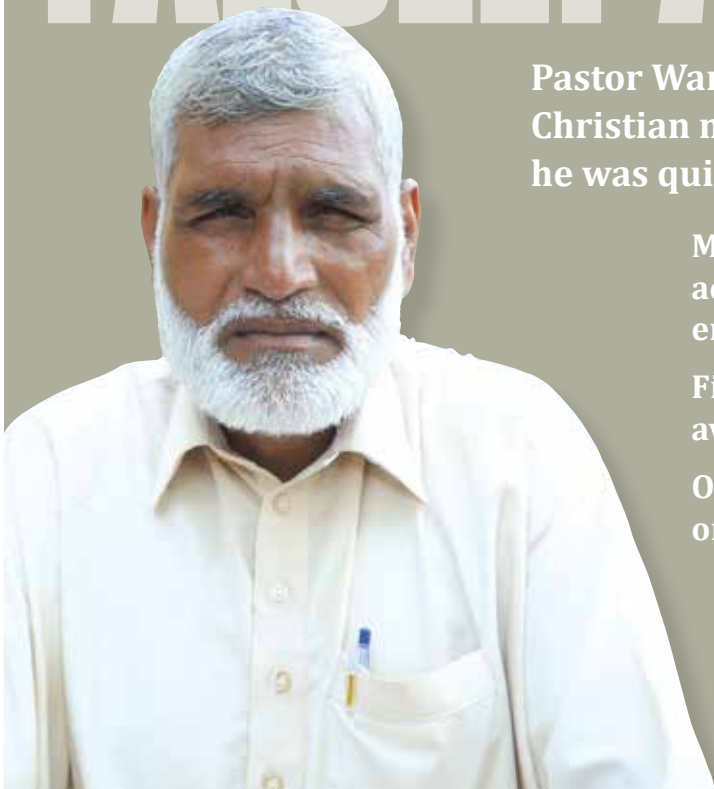
Organised by Action Challenge, this is a great opportunity for supporters of Release to take part, opting to support Release as their chosen charity, and to enjoy some of the finest scenery in the UK.

Come as an individual or group, choosing to complete the whole route or a shorter section. You'll get full support and hospitality all the way.

Find out more at ultrachallenge.com



FALSELY ACCUSED




Pastor Waris was falsely accused to stop his Christian ministry in Pakistan. Thankfully, he was quickly cleared of all charges.

Meanwhile believers continue to be falsely accused under the blasphemy laws – often enduring lengthy detentions in prison.

Find out more in our new 10-minute DVD, available free of charge to supporters.

Order today using the accompanying form or by calling 01689 823491.

For our latest videos subscribe to:
 [releaseinternational](http://releaseinternational.com)





THE DAY OF THE CHRISTIAN MARTYR

Monday, June 29, 2020

Release invites you and your church to join us next year in remembering modern-day Christian martyrs on or around June 29, 2020.

A resource pack will be available in April 2020. Please use the attached card to order your pack today.



☎ 01689 823491 🌐 releaseinternational.org/martyrs

✉ martyrsday@releaseinternational.org

🐦 #IWillNotAbandonThem



Will you leave a legacy of enduring faith and love?

A legacy gift to Release International can be a natural continuation of your commitment to sharing God's love and compassion with persecuted Christians around the world.

For 50 years, your generous gifts have enabled Christians to stand strong in their faith in the face of persecution. With your support, Release's partners are providing prayerful, pastoral and practical help to persecuted Christians in over 25 countries.

By including a gift to Release International in your Will you can enable that support to continue.

To request a free legacy brochure please call us on 01689 823491 or email info@releaseinternational.org

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
Voice
of Persecuted Christians

releaseinternational.org

prayershield

January–March 2020



Kan and Maiah care for children whose parents' Christian ministry puts them at risk.

JANUARY 2020

Heavenly Father,

Thank You, Lord, that You are my hiding place.

Lord, please be close to my Christian brothers and sisters who are on the run or in hiding, and those who have been driven far from home.

Remind them that You are their Father and that they have 'an eternal house in heaven' (2 Corinthians 5:1). Please lead them to a place of safety and restore to them all that they have lost.

In Jesus' name.

Amen

MYANMAR

WEDNESDAY 1: At the start of a new year, let's pray that God will remind His persecuted people in Myanmar – and worldwide – that He has a plan and purpose for them. Thank Him that He keeps all His promises (2 Corinthians 2:20).

THURSDAY 2: In some areas of Myanmar, rebel groups reportedly expect Christians to surrender their sons and daughters to become child soldiers as a 'penalty' for following Jesus. Ask God to protect all children from being recruited.

FRIDAY 3: Ask God to bless Kan and his wife, Maiah, (pictured) who care for the children of Christian workers

so that their parents can continue their ministries without worrying about their children's safety.

SATURDAY 4: Pray that those who have had to flee their homes in Myanmar will be powerful witnesses to God's faithfulness wherever they go.

SUNDAY 5: Pray for Pastor U Maung, who was among 58 people abducted by militia in Rakhine state in October. Christians fear for his safety as the Arakan Army who kidnapped him are notorious for targeting religious minorities.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians

MONDAY 6: Pray for the families and congregations of Pastor U Tun Nu from Mrauk-U township and Pastor U Thar Tun from Buthidaung, both of whom were abducted and killed by Arakan Army militia last year.

TUESDAY 7: Pray for the church in Myanmar, that it will be known for its steadfast faith, despite its many trials.

NIGERIA

**'I AM NOT AFRAID
BECAUSE OF MY GOD.
ANYTHING I ASK FOR,
HE GIVES ABUNDANTLY.'**
Alice, Plateau state, Nigeria

WEDNESDAY 8: Please pray for all those Christians who have been forced out of their homes, often more than once, due to ongoing insecurity in north and central Nigeria. Some have been in displacement camps for more than five years.

THURSDAY 9: Praise God for the resilience of displaced Christians like Alice Bulus (pictured). Alice's husband was killed during a militant raid on their village in Plateau state in 2011. A Release associate ministry has helped Alice relocate twice, due to further violent attacks. Her faith remains strong.

FRIDAY 10: Our partners say that many young people in displacement camps are vulnerable to prostitution or forced conversion. Ask God

to defend and deliver them (Psalm 82:3-4).

SATURDAY 11: Since 2011, an estimated 11,000 people in Nigeria have been killed in conflict involving Fulani militants. Pray for an end to this bloodshed and a move of God among these militants.

SUNDAY 12: Please pray for our partners in Nigeria whose work includes providing practical support to displaced communities. Ask God to sustain them as they work tirelessly to restore hope.

MONDAY 13: *Boko Haram* extremists abducted and killed Lawrence Dacighir and Godfrey Shikagham, Christians from Plateau state who were working with displaced people in Maiduguri, Borno state. Pray for their grieving families.

TUESDAY 14: Pray for villagers in Shaforon and Kodumti, Adamawa state, where two people died and six others were wounded when gunmen launched a night raid in September. Among the wounded was an 11-year-old whose father was killed. He had lost his mother in a previous attack.

WEDNESDAY 15: Pray that government and military officials in Nigeria will make concerted efforts to curb the violence and to protect vulnerable villages.

THURSDAY 16: Ask God to give wisdom to church leaders in Nigeria as they lead their congregations through

troubled times and share in their suffering.

FRIDAY 17: A wave of recent kidnappings across Kaduna state appears to have targeted church leaders and their families. A pastor and his son, a pastor's wife and a bishop's two children were abducted in one fortnight recently. Pray for their safe return.

SATURDAY 18: Praise God for the safe return of six students and two staff kidnapped at a Christian-run school, Engravers' College in Kaduna, in October after three weeks in captivity. Families reportedly paid a ransom.

SUNDAY 19: Please continue to pray for Leah Sharibu, the teenager from Dapchi being held by *Boko Haram* because she refuses to recant her faith. Pray the Government will do all it can to bring her home.



Alice's faith remains strong even though militants killed her husband and destroyed her home in Nigeria.

MALAYSIA

MONDAY 20: Ask God to protect Christians from a Muslim background in Malaysia. Many are in hiding amid concerted efforts by the authorities to root them out.

TUESDAY 21: Our partners in Malaysia say Islamic authorities have stepped up their persecution of church leaders and evangelicals in general. Pray for wisdom and courage for those facing persecution.

WEDNESDAY 22: Praise God that the underground church is reportedly growing in Malaysia. Pray that He will multiply it further.

THURSDAY 23: February 13 marks the third anniversary of the abduction of Pastor Raymond Koh in Petaling Jaya, which the country's Human Rights Commission has blamed on 'Special Branch police'. Pray for his safe return.

IRAN

FRIDAY 24: Pray for the church in Iran amid a government-led campaign to try to stop the spread of Christianity, with a particular focus on house church leaders and those involved in evangelism and teaching.

SATURDAY 25: Ebrahim Firouzi was released in October, after more than six years in jail. Pray that his faith stays strong as he starts two years' internal exile, to complete his sentence.

SUNDAY 26: Continue to pray for Pastor Victor bet Tamraz, his wife Shamiram Issavi Khabizeh, their son Ramiel and three other Christians arrested with them: all have appealed against their prison sentences, some of which are lengthy.

MONDAY 27: Praise God for the bold witness of Fatemeh (also known as Ailar) Bakhteri who is serving a one-year sentence in Evin Prison. She refused to renounce Christ, despite appeal judges putting heavy pressure on her to do so.

TUESDAY 28: Pray for Saheb Fadaie (also known as Zaman), co-defendant of Fatemeh (above), who also refused to renounce his faith at his appeal hearing. He is serving a ten-year prison sentence for church activities.

WEDNESDAY 29: Pray that God will use Christian inmates of Iranian prisons such as Evin to speak of His great love for every prisoner.

THURSDAY 30: Continue to pray that the Iranian authorities will come to uphold religious freedom and begin to recognise the church as a force for social good.

FRIDAY 31: Praise God for the powerful way He has used the ministry of Morteza and Arezou in Turkey to bring many people to Christ, since persecution forced them to flee Iran (see *Voice* magazine, page 6).

FEBRUARY 2020

NORTH KOREA

SATURDAY 1: It is illegal to worship anyone except the Supreme Leader in North Korea, so Christians are forced underground. Pray that those who decide to flee will be invisible to border guards and to informants in China whose job it is to denounce defectors.

SUNDAY 2: Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) Korea has recently published a Korean translation of *The 21*, a book about the 21 Coptic Christians martyred in Libya in 2015. Pray that it will draw many inside North Korea to Christ.

MONDAY 3: Many North Korean defectors reportedly end up in cults in South Korea, simply because they are paid to attend. Ask God to protect them from false teaching and lead them to good churches.

TUESDAY 4: Praise God that 25 new students have enrolled in VOM Korea's discipleship training school for North Korean defectors this quarter alone. Many have been involved in cults (see above).

WEDNESDAY 5: Pray for wisdom and guidance for those discipling Christians from North Korea, including those front-line workers who do so at great personal risk.

THURSDAY 6: Our partners say many marriages between North Korean defectors and Chinese men fail: typically, the wife leaves China for South Korea, and the abandoned husband blames the 'church'



Front-line workers meet secretly to teach the Bible to North Koreans.

for stealing his wife. Pray that every member of these families will come to Christ.

FRIDAY 7: Please pray for the successful transmission of VOM Korea's daily radio programme and its 24/7 satellite radio broadcast, which share the gospel and disciple Christians inside North Korea.

SATURDAY 8: Ask God to bless and protect the VOM Korea team as they travel abroad to deliver discipleship training for those who have suffered persecution. Those who attend often take great risks to do so.

CHINA

SUNDAY 9: Praise God that Christianity is growing fast in China, despite intense

persecution. Sources quoted by Release partner China Aid estimate that there are now more than 100 million Christians there.

MONDAY 10: Continue to pray for Pastor Wang Yi, Qin Defu and Ge Yingfeng, members of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, Sichuan, who have been in custody since December 2018. Additional charges of 'illegal business operations' have recently been brought against Pastor Wang and Qin Defu.

TUESDAY 11: Praise God for the release of Gou Zhongcan, who is affiliated with the Early Rain Covenant Church (above). He had spent seven months in custody.

WEDNESDAY 12: The state-registered megachurch, Funan County Christian

Church, in Anhui was demolished partway through a service in October – and pastors Geng Yimin and Sun Yongyao were arrested. Pray for a new home for this congregation.

THURSDAY 13: Pray for six Uyghur Christians in Xinjiang province who have been sentenced to between five and seven years for 'illegal' church activity. Some have only recently come to Christ.

FRIDAY 14: Authorities in Zhejiang province have introduced new restrictions on churches, including bans on baptisms and collection boxes. Pray the gospel will spread, despite these hurdles.

SATURDAY 15: Pray that the church in China will grow in unity and faith as a result of persecution.

IRAQ

SUNDAY 16: Renewed insecurity in Baghdad and in Syria has unsettled those Christians who have chosen to stay in Iraq. Islamist and Shia militia groups are still a threat. Pray that security in the region will improve.

MONDAY 17: When Myriam (pictured) was nine, she gave an interview which attracted international attention: she forgave Islamic State whose violence forced her family to flee Qaraqosh. Now 14, Myriam has returned with her family. Pray that God will protect them.

TUESDAY 18: Our partners in Kurdistan are distributing food parcels, clothes, medicines and Bibles to refugees and internally displaced people. Pray that this support – and the witness of other Christians in the camp – will help build religious tolerance.

WEDNESDAY 19: Continue to pray for Halla (who features in our recent film *Halla's story*) and the many other displaced Christians being cared for by our partners in Erbil, Kurdistan. Pray that Christ will sustain and encourage them.

THURSDAY 20: An estimated 50,000 Christians have remained in Iraq, scattered across the Nineveh plains around Mosul. Pray that God will multiply their number.

FRIDAY 21: Pray for the thousands of Iraqi Christian families in other countries,

including Jordan, who have been seeking asylum abroad for years. Pray that God will provide safe homes and welcoming communities.

SATURDAY 22: Please pray for protection and the continuing favour of God upon our partners in Iraq as they serve displaced people. Praise God that they have a good working relationship with the Government of Kurdistan.

ALGERIA

SUNDAY 23: More than 11 churches in Algeria have been closed since a government crackdown began in November 2017. Pray that this persecution will end soon.

MONDAY 24: Pray for Christians in Tizi Ouzou province where many of the recent church closures have occurred. Three churches there were closed on one day in October.

TUESDAY 25: When Christians protested peacefully outside

provincial government buildings about church closures in Tizi Ouzou in October, 97 of them were violently arrested. Pray that the authorities will recognise that Christians are a blessing to society, not a threat.

WEDNESDAY 26: The Government recently ordered officials to investigate the finances of Protestant churches which it sees as spreading 'destructive ideas' from abroad. Pray that these investigations will not provide fuel for further persecution.

THURSDAY 27: Several churches have been told they will be sealed in the future. Pray these threats will not materialise.

FRIDAY 28: Pray for wisdom for Algerian pastors who have been ordered to cease all church activities.

SATURDAY 29: Pray that recent state persecution of Christians will not succeed in stirring up negative feeling towards the church in the Algerian people more widely.



Myriam forgave Islamic State for forcing her family from Qaraqosh, Iraq.

MARCH 2020 INDIA

SUNDAY 1: Pray for Pastor Palathingal Johnson and his family in Rajasan, Bihar, who narrowly escaped death when an extremist mob broke into their home. Only the quick response of Christian neighbours headed off the attack.

MONDAY 2: Praise God that He is a 'hiding place' for every persecuted Christian in India – and worldwide – and that He surrounds them 'with songs of deliverance' (Psalm 32:7), as He did for the Johnson family (above).

TUESDAY 3: Please pray for retired pastor Patram

Mangala, his wife Sarla and their two sons who suffered multiple injuries when up to 40 extremists attacked them. A court had just ruled the extremists had no right to try to erect a Hindu idol on the Christians' land.

WEDNESDAY 4: Praise God that five Christians accused of murdering a Hindu extremist leader in 2008 have recently been released on bail after more than ten years in jail. Two others were granted bail last year. The murder, which Maoist rebels admitted to, triggered riots in Odisha (formerly Orissa) state in which hundreds of Christians died.

THURSDAY 5: In Tamil Nadu, police have told house churches to stop holding worship meetings – and to apply for a licence to hold prayer services. Indian law requires no such permits. Pray for wisdom for church leaders in this area.

FRIDAY 6: Pray for Pastor Ramesh Pargi of Sharon Fellowship Church in Dhadhela, Gujarat, who suffered severe injuries when Hindu extremists beat him unconscious for praying for his uncle in their village.

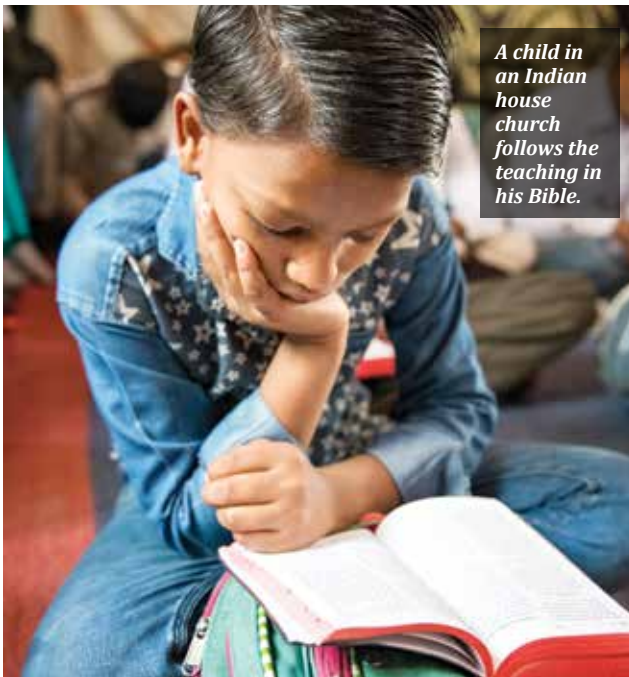
SATURDAY 7: Police broke up a gathering of 6,000 worshippers in Pandeypurwa, Uttar Pradesh, after extremists levelled false charges against its organiser, Pastor Santosh Jaiswal. Praise God that Christians are meeting in such large numbers.

SUNDAY 8: Religious rights campaigners in Uttar Pradesh believe that Hindu extremists are mapping Christian activity then persecuting one group after another. Pray those in India who oppose the gospel with violence will be thwarted.

MONDAY 9: Please pray that God will raise up into positions of influence and authority people in India who will champion religious freedom for all.

SYRIA

TUESDAY 10: Pray that God's peace and presence will be with Christians in Syria, amid



A child in an Indian house church follows the teaching in his Bible.

renewed unrest due to Turkey's military campaign in north-east Syria. Thousands of Christians have been displaced.

WEDNESDAY 11: The Kurdish region of Syria hosts large Syriac and Assyrian Christian communities, as well as Christian converts. Pray especially for Christians in this area: some fear that Turkish forces and their allies among Syria's opposition may be hostile to them.

THURSDAY 12: Pray that, as Syria starts to rebuild itself, politicians on all sides will uphold and even champion the religious rights of Christians and other minorities.

FRIDAY 13: Pray that Christian communities in Syria will not be intimidated but rather become known as people who bring reconciliation, healing, peace and hope.

PAKISTAN

SATURDAY 14: Please pray for Christians accused of blasphemy in Pakistan who have been forced to go into hiding or to leave their homes, for fear of extremist reprisals.

SUNDAY 15: A recent US State Department report says 77 people in Pakistan, including a disproportionate number of Christians, remain behind bars on blasphemy charges. Continue to pray

for the repeal of Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

MONDAY 16: Zafar Bhatti has suffered repeated delays to his appeal against a life sentence for blasphemy. Pray that God will protect him and his wife, Nawab – and restore them to good health.

TUESDAY 17: Pervaiz Masih was acquitted of blasphemy last year – but he and his wife, Zareena, live among his accusers. Pray for their protection. Pervaiz still works as a bonded labourer in a brick kiln; Zareena has been left disabled after police assaulted her.

WEDNESDAY 18: Please pray for Christians such as Asia Bibi and her family who have been forced to seek asylum abroad because their lives have been put in danger following blasphemy accusations.

THURSDAY 19: Our partners in Pakistan say that the forced conversion and forced marriage of young Christian and Hindu girls is a growing problem. Pray that the Government will do more to protect religious minorities and uphold their rights.

FRIDAY 20: Please pray for our partners in Pakistan, for their protection and for perseverance. Pray God will bless their ministry to support, strengthen and speak up for those who face discrimination and persecution.

ERITREA

SATURDAY 21: Pray for the many Christians who have fled Eritrea, to escape persecution or because military conscription is at odds with their religious convictions. Ask God to help them resettle abroad.

SUNDAY 22: Many Eritrean Christians have already spent years in refugee camps in Ethiopia where they meet for worship in large numbers. Pray that many other refugees will see God's love in them and turn to Christ.

MONDAY 23: Eritrean officials arrested about 600 Christians in multiple raids in June. Pray especially for 45 believers thought to have been detained in Agordat, a notoriously hot, inhospitable place.

TUESDAY 24: Eighty people were arrested in the Godaif district of Asmara in August. Pray that this church community will grow in faith and unity.

WEDNESDAY 25: The number of Christians imprisoned in Eritrea rose last year to about 400, as hopes for an easing of persecution following a peace deal with Ethiopia faded. Pray these hopes will be realised.

THURSDAY 26: Continue to pray for the many Eritrean Christians who have been behind bars for more than ten years, including Twen Theodros, Mussie Eyob, Mussie Ezaz and Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel.



Wenny lost both sons in a suicide bomb attack on her church in East Java.

INDONESIA

FRIDAY 27: Please continue to pray for those still struggling to come to terms with bereavement or injury after the suicide bombings of three churches in Surabaya, East Java, in May 2018. Some people are still requiring medical treatment.

SATURDAY 28: Pray for Wenny Hudojo (pictured) who lost her sons, Nathan and Evan, when suicide bombers

targeted St Mary's Church in Surabaya. Wenny was seriously injured and remains in pain.

SUNDAY 29: Praise God for the powerful witness of congregations such as Surabaya Central Pentecostal Church who continued to meet immediately after the 2018 bombings. Pray their determination to remain faithful to Christ will cause many to want to know more about Him.

Sources: China Aid; *Daily Post* (Nigeria); International Christian Concern; Middle East Concern; Morning Star News; Release partners and contacts; Sahara Reporters; Stefanos Foundation; *The Nation* (Nigeria); VOM Canada; VOM Korea; VOM USA.

While we do not provide financial support to every Christian mentioned in *Prayer Shield*, we believe in the power of prayer to change lives.

MONDAY 30: Pray for Andreas Sarno, 80, and Bintang Sirait, 73, who were convicted of blasphemy last March for distributing Christian booklets and sentenced to eight months in prison.

TUESDAY 31: Andreas Sarno (above) says he would have preferred a longer sentence so he would have had more time to share the gospel with his fellow inmates. Praise God for him and other Christian prisoners who have led others to Christ behind bars.

Lord Jesus,

Thank You for Your faithfulness. You never fail us, precious Lord: You are always true to Your word.

Thank You, Lord, that You promise to give us the grace we need to endure in all circumstances (2 Corinthians 12:9). Your power is made perfect in our weakness.

Teach my persecuted family, Lord, how to remain steadfast and overcome – and remind them that You have overcome the world (John 16:33). Hallelujah!

Amen

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Release International, PO Box 54, Orpington BR5 4RT
Tel: 01689 823491 Email: info@releaseinternational.org
Registered Charity 280577 (Scotland: SC040456)



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