

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

APR-JUN 2021

# voice

of Persecuted Christians

**FLEEING  
THE CRISIS  
IN TIGRAY**

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



# Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

Caring for  
Christian  
prisoners

**Pastor Richard Wurmbbrand, who inspired the founding of Release International in 1968, wrote in his biography *Tortured for Christ*:**

**‘When a Christian goes to prison – and often to torture or death – the suffering only begins. The family suffers endlessly.’**

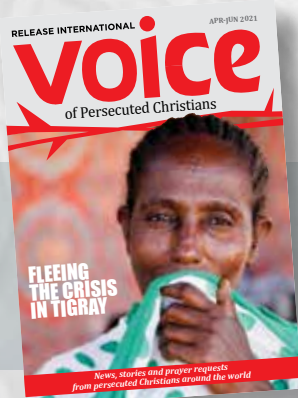
That’s why Release today continues Richard’s important ministry to care for Christian prisoners of faith and their families.

On page 8 you can read how Waseem, our partner in **Pakistan**, is reaching out to believers who have been falsely accused under the country’s blasphemy laws. Most suffer many years in jail in poor conditions but, thanks to your support, Waseem’s ministry brings hope and life to both prisoners and their families.

Inside **North Korea** the brutal regime continues to detain and torture believers at will. You can read the powerful testimony of defector Minji on page 16, where she describes how she first heard the life-changing message of Jesus in a Chinese prison.

**China** also continues systematic oppression of churches, using the latest surveillance and web technologies (page 10).

We rejoice that some 170 Christian prisoners of faith have recently been released inside **Eritrea** – but are deeply troubled by the armed conflict in northern **Ethiopia** which has claimed tens of thousands of lives, causing many Christians to flee to neighbouring Sudan (page 13). Please remember those who suffer – and pray that stability will be restored.



Recycle this magazine: share it with a friend!



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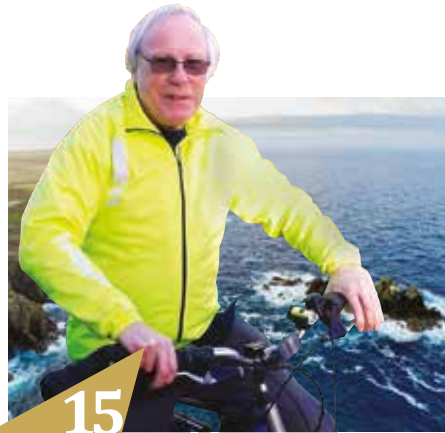
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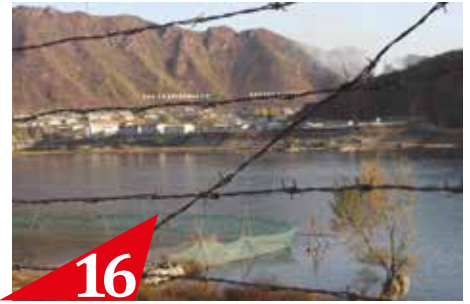
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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL



of Persecuted Christians

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.

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# Faith under fire



## Pray for Leah

Nigerian Christian Leah Sharibu has now been held in captivity by terrorists for more than three years.

She was just 14 years old when abducted by Boko Haram militants in February 2018 – along with more than 100 other schoolgirls. Nearly all of the other girls have been released and returned home, but Leah remains in captivity. It is understood that she has refused to renounce her Christian faith. Pray for Leah's release, and for comfort for her mother Rebecca Rebecca (pictured right).

**Sign up to Release**



*Ebrahim described his harassment by Iranian security forces in a series of videos posted in February.*

## Ebrahim Firouzi detained after releasing videos

Iranian Christian Ebrahim Firouzi – currently living in internal exile in the remote southeastern city of Rask – was recently detained by the authorities on new charges.

On February 8, Ebrahim, aged 34, appeared in court to respond to allegations of 'propaganda against the Islamic Republic in favour of hostile groups'. This followed the posting of a series of videos two days earlier, in which he describes his continuing harassment by the Iranian intelligence service (MOIS).

Before his court appearance, he told friends: *'I ask Christians to pray not for my acquittal, but for the great name of God to be glorified.'* Ebrahim has been arrested many times, spending more than six years in prison on various charges.

Unable to post bail of 50 million tomans (about £1,200), Ebrahim was transferred to Chabahar prison in southeast Iran, where he began a hunger strike in protest. According to Middle East Concern, he was persuaded to stop after receiving assurances his case would be dealt with promptly. Ebrahim was finally released on February 27 after his family posted bail.

Ebrahim said the case against him could lead to another three years in jail – but he is 'not afraid of being sent back to prison for telling the truth', he told human rights organisation Article 18.

*'The Iranian church has never sought war with the government,'* he said. *'We are believers in Jesus Christ the Lord and, according to the message of the Bible, we want to live a quiet and lawful life.'*

**• Pray that the charges against Ebrahim will be dropped, and that the security forces will stop harassing him and his family.**

## Sudanese Christian leader beaten

A Christian leader in Sudan was detained and beaten in February for speaking out against the burning of a church building.

Masked men, believed to be national security officers, seized Osama Saeed Kodi, chairman of the Christian Youth Union of Al Jazirah state, then handcuffed and blindfolded him.

The men beat Osama and threatened to kill him if he continued raising objections to the burning of a Sudanese Church of Christ (SCOC) worship hall in Tambul, local Christians told Morning Star News. He was released after a few hours.

**• Pray that God will protect the life of Osama Saeed Kodi and other Christian leaders in Sudan.**

## Listen to our latest podcasts



**All for Jesus:** What is Christian discipleship, and how are we to understand it in Western culture, which values individualism so highly? March's podcast looks at our new Bible study resource *All for Jesus*, which explores discipleship through the lens of persecution.

**Iran:** Our partner Lazarus Yeghnazar from 222 Ministries talks about the surprising growth of the church in Iran and among the Farsi-speaking world, how the authorities have responded and how persecution has increased. He enthusiastically expresses the great passion that Iranian Christians have for the Lord – and how this challenges our own understanding of what it means to follow Jesus.

**Persecution trends:** Kenneth Harrod speaks to Release colleagues Tom and Jack about our recent persecution trends report. They identify some of the pressures Christians are likely to face in several key areas this year, and discuss how the report can help individuals and churches to be better informed and to pray.

**Our topical Voice podcasts are available from [releaseinternational.org/podcast](http://releaseinternational.org/podcast) or via your favourite podcast app.**



**CONFLICT IN TIGRAY:** Many thousands of refugees, including Christians, have crossed into neighbouring Sudan to escape armed conflict and persecution in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia. Read more on page 13. Photo: Reuters/Baz Ratner

## Indian churches attacked by militants

A mob incited by armed extremists in Madhya Pradesh, India, disrupted worship services and beat congregation members in two churches in February.

Police in Alirajpur district then detained the leaders of the two churches, pastors Malsingh Meda and Dilipsingh Vasunia, along with members of Pastor Meda's church. In the evening around 300 militants surrounded the police station where the believers were being held, shouting slogans and calling for the pastors to be charged under the state's new anti-conversion law. Pastor Vasunia was

later charged with forcible conversion and released on bail.

Though police were at both locations before the attacks, they allegedly did nothing to stop damage to the church buildings or the assaults on Christians, eyewitnesses told Morning Star News.

*'One of them [the militants], carrying a gun, slapped me twice on my face,' said Pastor Meda. 'Another man slapped me, and three others hit me with sticks.'*

**• Ask God to protect churches in India, and pray that the charges against Pastor Vasunia will be dropped. Pray that anti-conversion laws in India will be repealed.**

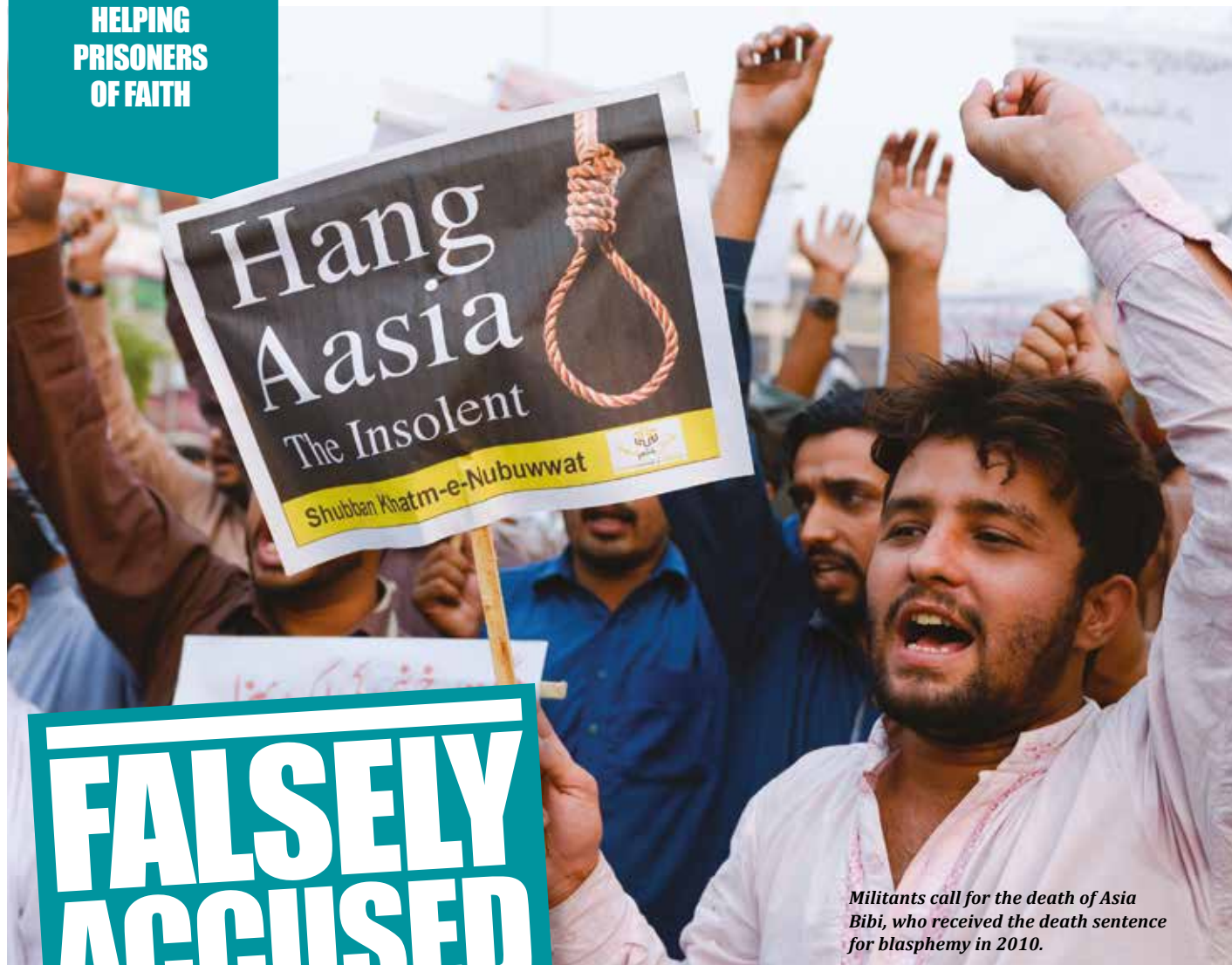
## Family celebrates return of daughter

Christian Asif Masih was overjoyed to have his 12-year-old daughter Farah back home in Faisalabad, Pakistan, following her alleged kidnapping, forcible conversion and marriage to a 45-year-old man, Khizar Hayat.

*'Praise God, for He has answered our prayers,'* said Asif hours after a judge ordered his daughter to be released from a government shelter where she was being held for her own protection. The court ruled that because the marriage between Farah and Hayat was not registered or verified, she should be reunited with her family.

Police found Farah chained in Hayat's home last December. While he was taken into custody and released on bail, he has yet to be charged for alleged kidnapping or rape – and fears for Farah's safety remain.

**• Thank God for Farah's release. Pray for healing and protection for her and her family and that justice will be served.**



*Militants call for the death of Asia Bibi, who received the death sentence for blasphemy in 2010.*

**FALSELY  
ACCUSED**

***Christians in Pakistan continue to be the victims of the country's notorious blasphemy laws – suffering abuse, violence and imprisonment.***

Christian Asif Pervaiz, a 37-year-old father of four, last year received the death sentence in Pakistan for allegedly sending 'blasphemous' text messages to a Muslim colleague in 2013.

After spending seven years in jail fighting his case, Asif was finally sentenced last September. The court in Lahore said that he did not offer enough evidence to prove his innocence, and ruled that he should first serve a three-year prison term for phone misuse, be fined 50,000 rupees (about £220) and then be 'hanged by his neck till his death'.

Asif was charged with blasphemy

in October 2013 after his former supervisor at a garment factory, Saeed Ahmed Khokhar, accused him of sending blasphemous text messages from his cell phone.

However, Asif maintained throughout that his supervisor had accused him only after he refused to convert to Islam. Asif's lawyer Saiful Malook said the prosecution's case was so weak that he could not understand why the judge had ruled against his client.

Malook previously represented Christian Asia Bibi – who was sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2010 and released in 2018.

Asif said he had lost his SIM card some days before the alleged incident. Malook argued that Khokhar had used this SIM to send derogatory text messages to his own mobile phone.

***'It has become a norm of trial court judges hearing blasphemy cases to convict the accused – no matter how weak the prosecution's case is'***

While a First Information Report (FIR) was initially registered against an 'unknown person', Asif's name was added to it later using a different pen, said his lawyer.

*'Although I'm greatly disappointed by the ruling in this case, one cannot ignore the fact that it has become a norm of trial court judges hearing blasphemy cases to convict the accused – no matter how weak the*



Asif (right) with his lawyer Saiful Malook.  
Photo: Morning Star News

prosecution's case is,' said his lawyer, who has appealed against the conviction.

*'The worst thing in blasphemy cases is that the accused are left to rot in jail for years till their innocence is finally proved.'*

Following the sentence, Asif's wife Marilyn and their three children went into hiding, to protect themselves from attacks by militants.

### Practical help

Release partner Waseem visited Asif in Lahore District Jail shortly after his conviction, to encourage him and pray with him. *'After that he was moved to Faisalabad, about 100 miles from Lahore, which has been more difficult. Now only his wife Marilyn can visit him,'* Waseem told Release.

*'We are helping to provide her basic needs, and also to give her help so she can visit her husband once a month – which otherwise would be a great financial challenge for her.'*

*'Marilyn told me after a visit in February that Asif needs glasses because he is always reading his Bible in prison, and that he has now read through the Bible nine times! She says he is quite optimistic.'*



Release partner Waseem (right) visits Asif's wife Marilyn.

## Please pray

'Marilyn said that visiting her husband is quite a difficult process for her – so please pray that Asif is moved to a prison in Lahore,' said Waseem. 'His lawyer has said that it may take another five years to resolve the case – so we must pray for his release as a matter of urgency. Pray too that God will protect Asif while he is in prison, and preserve his mental and physical health.'

Sources: Release International, Morning Star News.

## PAKISTAN'S BLASPHEMY LAWS

Those convicted of blaspheming Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, potentially face the death penalty – although to date this sentence has never been carried out for blasphemy in Pakistan.

Even though all those convicted have eventually been released on appeal,



Pakistani Christians protest against the blasphemy laws in 2014 after a mob beat to death a Christian couple who had been accused of desecrating a Koran. Photo: Reuters/Faisal Mahmood.

this is typically only after the victims have endured many years of imprisonment while their cases proceed through the country's labyrinthine legal system – causing untold anguish to prisoners and their families.

Accusations of blasphemy in Pakistan are common and often motivated by personal vendettas or religious hatred. The highly inflammatory accusations have the potential to spark mass protests and mob violence.

Many of those accused of blasphemy never reach the courtroom: 62 blasphemy-accused have been killed since 1990. Lawyers defending those charged with blasphemy, presiding judges, and individuals speaking against the law have also been targeted.

In Pakistan 24 Christians are currently in prison due to blasphemy charges. They are defendants in 21 blasphemy cases at various levels of the judicial process.

With no presumption of innocence in Pakistan, anyone accused of blasphemy can be jailed, often for years, while those who make false allegations go unpunished.

In 2018, a Pakistani Senate Special Committee on Human Rights and the Islamabad High Court recommended that those making false blasphemy accusations be given the same punishments as those for blasphemy convictions – but the government dismissed the idea. The committee also recommended that anyone registering a blasphemy case at a police station must bring two witnesses.

While sentences for blasphemy can range from several years in prison to death, a person making a false accusation faces potential punishment of only six months in prison or a fine of 1,000 rupees (about £4). Successive governments have acknowledged that the blasphemy laws are blatantly misused – but little effort has been made to stop the abuses.

Rights activists say it is unlikely that any government will move to repeal or amend the blasphemy laws due to fierce Islamic religious sentiments in the Muslim-majority country.



Waseem visits Nawab, whose husband Zafar was sentenced to life imprisonment for blasphemy in 2017.

# Remembering those in prison

*Thanks to your support, Release partner Waseem is able to care for Christian prisoners and their families in the name of Jesus.*

In August 2015 Pervaiz Masih was living with his wife and three children in a small village in the Kasur district of Punjab province. He worked as a fourth-generation day labourer, and at a local brick-kiln factory.

After a dispute with one employer over payment, Pervaiz was falsely accused of blasphemy. When the police came to arrest him, they badly beat his wife Zareena, damaging her back and neck.

Unusually for a blasphemy case (see page 7), Pervaiz was released on bail after only 20 days. Shortly afterwards, however, after he returned to work, the family suffered further tragedy when their three-year-old daughter drowned in a water container at the brick kiln.

Finally, the Kasur Session Court acquitted him of blasphemy for lack of evidence in 2019. Yet today Pervaiz, Zareena and their three children still live in fear. *'We face a lot of danger in the village,'* he said. *'I cannot work, or travel about. I have to watch my step. My family is suffering greatly.'*

Thanks to your support, our partner Waseem has been helping the family, giving them a small plot of land so they could build a new home in a safe location. *'Pervaiz is still in danger of being kidnapped or killed,'* said Waseem. Zareena – who continues to suffer following her beating in 2015 – is receiving medical treatment.

Waseem also provides financial support and pastoral encouragement

to Nawab, wife of prisoner of faith Pastor Zafar Bhatti.

***'Zafar has been attacked on several occasions, even shot seven times by a prison guard, but God has kept him alive'***

Zafar has been imprisoned in Rawalpindi's Adiala Central Jail since 2012, when he was charged with sending blasphemous text messages. In May 2017, nearly five years after his arrest, he was sentenced to life imprisonment for blasphemy – a charge he has always denied.

While in prison Zafar has been attacked on several occasions, even shot seven times by a prison guard, but God has kept him alive.

In April 2019 a judge said there was no evidence against Zafar and that he should be released – but the





Waseem (centre) with Zareena and Pervaiz Masih.

prosecution lawyer and police said they needed more time to produce evidence. To date his appeal hearings have been adjourned on numerous occasions.

Last year Zafar suffered his second heart attack in jail, and now needs treatment for hypertension and diabetes.

Nawab has struggled to make ends meet since her husband's imprisonment. Her poor health and Covid-19 restrictions have made it difficult for her to visit her husband in prison. However, thanks to your gifts, Waseem has been able to keep in contact, providing prayer and practical support.



**Population:** 238 million

**Capital:** Islamabad

**Government:** Federal parliamentary republic

**Religion:** Muslim: 95.8%, Christian: 2.5%, Other: 1.7%

Sources: World Factbook, Operation World.

## YOUR OPPORTUNITY TO CARE FOR CHRISTIAN PRISONERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Release helps Christian prisoners of faith and their families around the world in the name of Jesus.

To support this vital ministry to courageous believers, we depend on the gifts and prayers of Christians in the UK and Ireland.

Your gift will be used to:

- Provide practical help and pastoral care for prisoners and their families
- Enable families to visit their loved ones in prison
- Give legal and other assistance

Please make a gift today using the attached form, at [releaseinternational.org/give](https://releaseinternational.org/give) or call: 01689 823491.



# CHINA'S DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

*The Chinese authorities are using an army of cyber experts and volunteers to monitor almost all online communications – part of their strategy to restrict churches and to contain all forms of dissent, writes Development Manager James Fraser.*

During the past year, as Christians in the UK and Ireland, we have become very used to online church in all its various forms.

We've enjoyed pre-recorded services complete with fireside sermons, multi-track worship songs and fun children's activities; live video call prayer meetings involving people from different towns and even different countries; evangelism and discipleship through online courses and discussion groups. Online church has been a lifeline for us. But what if your participation in this kind of

digital fellowship was enough to see your home raided and your church leaders detained?

In this country we are vaguely aware that our online activity is tracked by cookies and algorithms. And although that may be mildly unsettling, until now it has not restrained our religious freedom.

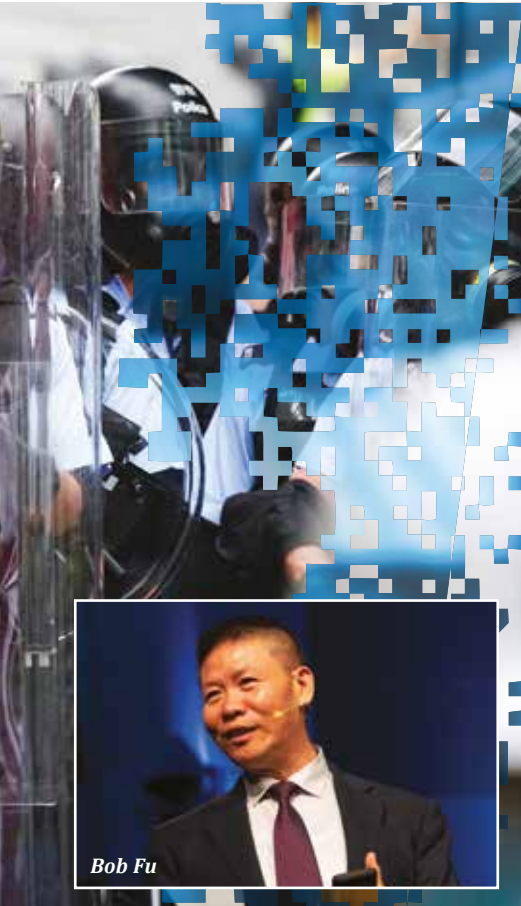
However, in China that is not the case. Right at the start of the pandemic a Christian leader in Shandong province called for seven days of fasting and online prayer for coronavirus victims – and was

promptly visited and questioned by public security agents. They informed him that he was engaging in illegal religious activities and placed him under administrative detention.

According to Release partner Bob Fu, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) practises 'digital authoritarianism' by employing an army of cyber experts and volunteers to monitor and track online activity.

*'There are millions of online police,' he said. 'They report any suspicious online religious activity. So even a prayer meeting could be detected and sometimes reported, and your home could be raided.'*

In February this year Wenzhou pastor Huang Yizi requested prayer after online monitors shut down his livestream sermons. Pastor Huang has already served two prison sentences for opposing the forcible removal of church crosses and is routinely monitored and randomly summoned for questioning by the authorities. His recent online censorship is simply another attempt to silence his gospel witness.



Bob Fu

As well as shorter-term detention for online infringement, Christian leaders in China also risk much longer sentences for faithfully leading their churches, and extended time in prison comes at huge personal and emotional cost.

In a recently released poem written in December 2019 – two days prior to being sentenced to nine years in prison – Early Rain Covenant Church pastor Wang Yi lamented the enforced separation from his son Shuya:

**Miss my Son**

*The peach blossom does not covet fruit*

*The East wind misunderstands how I miss my son.*

*If the lamb did not replace Isaac*

*How could one compare the biological with the Heavenly Father?*

Shuya was only 12 years old when Pastor Wang was imprisoned. He will be 21 by the time his father is released. It is difficult to imagine their mutual loss.

However, despite the renewed aggression of the Chinese government

against Christians, God’s purposes are not thwarted. There is clear evidence that the church there continues to grow.

One practical way Release partners ‘remember those in prison’ (Hebrews 13:3) is by locating Christian prisoners and reconnecting them to their families and friends.

In 2017, for example, Ju Dianghong and Liang Qin were sentenced to jail terms of 13 and 10 years respectively for their Christian activities. But the location of their prison was never disclosed, and no one knew where the women were.

After an exhaustive search Release partners were eventually able to locate Ju and Liang in a remote facility more than 1,000 miles from Ju’s hometown. Naturally, their families and friends celebrated, although the distance makes visiting them expensive and time-consuming.

Now that their prison address has been found there is nothing to stop Ju and Liang’s wider Christian family expressing their support and encouragement. Could you write to these faithful Christian sisters and assure them that they have not been forgotten?

# PLEASE SEND A LETTER OR CARD

Liang Qin  
No. 1 Prison for Women of  
Yunnan Province,  
Kunyang Town, Jinning District  
Kunming City, Yunnan Province  
China 650600



Ju Dianghong. Photo: China Aid

Ju Dianghong  
No. 1 Prison for Women of  
Yunnan Province,  
Kunyang Town, Jinning District  
Kunming City, Yunnan Province  
China 650600

**When writing, please follow our guidelines:**

- be polite and respectful
- keep your letter or card short and write clearly
- say that they are loved and not forgotten
- quote an encouraging Bible verse

**Please DO NOT:**

- mention Release International or any other organisation
- write about politics or criticise the authorities
- give your full name or contact details
- send any money with your letter or card

More information on how to write to Christian prisoners is given in our *Reach Out* booklet available from [releaseinternational.org/reachout](http://releaseinternational.org/reachout). To ask for a paper copy, please call: 01689 823491.





*Mussie Eyob*



*Twen Theodros*

*Two long-term Christian prisoners of faith – the focus of prayer for many years – have finally been set free in Eritrea, along with some 170 other believers.*

Twen Theodros and Mussie Eyob (pictured) were among 171 Christian prisoners who have been released since August last year – some after more than a decade behind bars.

Twen was arrested for her faith in the Eritrean capital Asmara in 2004. A new believer, she could have been released had she chosen to renounce her faith. But she refused. She was sent to various prisons and suffered beatings and torture.

Her story is one of remarkable courage. Twen shared a shipping container with the gospel singer Helen Berhane, and despite her own suffering, stood up for Helen and took beatings intended for her. She is described as a precious, lovely Christian who is determined to stay

faithful to Jesus. Release International sources say she remains strong in her faith, and has chosen to stay in Eritrea.

Mussie Eyob was arrested in Saudi Arabia in 2011 after preaching outside a mosque in Jeddah. Mussie told his family he was ready to die for his faith in Christ. He was deported to Eritrea and imprisoned. He has also decided to stay in the country. Release contacts say Mussie is doing well.

Some 130 Christian prisoners remain in state jails in Eritrea. The army has also locked up conscripts who have been arrested for their faith. It is estimated there are about the same number again, though little is known about those being held by the military.



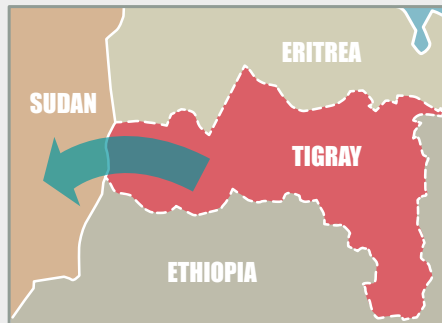
***Some 130 Christian prisoners remain in state jails in Eritrea.***

# CHRISTIANS FLEE CONFLICT

Many Eritrean Christians who fled to northern Ethiopia to escape persecution have been caught up in the growing conflict in Tigray. Hundreds of Christians in refugee camps have been displaced again as Ethiopia and Eritrea join forces against Tigrayan rebels (see map).

The United Nations is warning of a humanitarian crisis, and observers fear the conflict could escalate into a regional war, drawing in Somalia and Sudan. Some fear it could destabilise the entire Horn of Africa. To date the fighting has killed an estimated 100,000 people and displaced hundreds of thousands more.

Tigrayans and other ethnic groups are calling for greater autonomy. But the Ethiopian government fears ethnic divisions could lead to the break-up of the country.



**Many thousands of refugees crossed into neighbouring Sudan last November to escape armed conflict in northern Ethiopia.**

The Ethiopian Prime Minister launched an attack against the region in November 2020, with support from Eritrea. Soldiers attacked several UN refugee camps, causing extensive damage, including the camp at Shimelba, where Release has supported Eritrean Christian refugees for many years.

Our partner Dr Berhane Asmelash has been in touch with some of the Christian refugees. He says, 'Most of them made it all the way to the capital Addis Ababa or to other camps.'

But a number of Christians died fleeing the violence. Among them, Selam, who was in her mid 30s. She had been imprisoned in Eritrea and tortured for her faith, which caused damage to her back. When the military attacked another UN refugee camp at Hitsats, Selam tried to escape. 'She walked for two days but couldn't make it,' says Dr Berhane. 'She collapsed on the way and died.'

## 800 killed at church

Ethiopian and Eritrean forces have been accused of a growing number of atrocities, including an alleged massacre at an Orthodox church in Axum, said to house the Ark of the Covenant. Reports claim some 800 people were killed there, including many priests and church members.

There have been other documented attacks on churches in the region. And according to unverified claims by Tigrayan activists, more than 1,000 priests have been killed in the violence. 'There is a spirit of killing,' says Dr Berhane.

*'Religion is power. Every village has a church. The church is the centre of the community. Remove the church and the community will be left without leaders.'*

Given the attacks on churches, it may seem puzzling that some Christians are being set free in Eritrea. 'The Ethiopian Prime Minister is a Christian,' says Dr Berhane. 'So the prisoner release in Eritrea may be to appease him for political gain.' However, many senior pastors remain in prison in Eritrea.

The crisis has shifted some of the focus of Release's support to Addis Ababa, where most of the refugees fled to. Dr Berhane adds: 'We provide food and pay for some healthcare. Wherever the Christians are, we try to help them.'

## Prayer needed

Please pray for the refugees who fled to Ethiopia rather than give up their faith, and who have now had to flee again.

Pray too for the prisoners who have been released. Many have been behind bars for years. 'Some were just children when they were arrested,' says Dr Berhane. 'Please pray that they will have full healing from the trauma they have suffered and be able to settle into the community. They will need work and financial support.'

Continue to pray for Christian prisoners still inside Eritrea too – that they will be released and that the apparent easing of persecution will continue. 'And,' says Dr Berhane, 'pray for the church – for courage.'



Protest against human rights abuses in Eritrea. Photo: IPS.

*What does the word 'discipleship' mean to you? And to what extent does the persecution of Christians challenge your understanding of what it means for you to be a disciple?*

# All for Jesus!

Release has just published a five-part Bible study for small groups called *All for Jesus*. Together the studies explore various aspects of what it means to live the Christian life; to be a follower of Jesus – whatever the cost: to live 'all for Jesus'.

Here in the UK we may not experience persecution in the way we know many of our brothers and sisters do around the world today. Nevertheless, the fact that Christians do suffer for their faith means there are valuable lessons we can learn about living the Christian life from their experience.

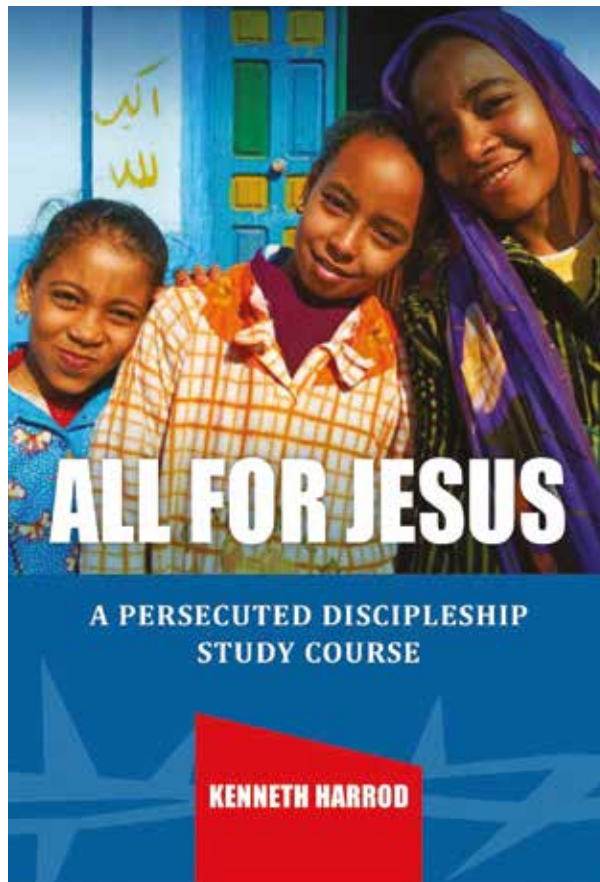


As Paul Robinson, Release's CEO, puts it: *'If we see Christians, our brothers and sisters, living fully for Jesus by the grace of God, in*

*places of intense persecution, then why not see it here in the UK? Why not you and I?'*

The *All for Jesus* study course looks, in turn, at the Christian life, the Christian church, the Christian gospel, the Christian hope and the call to Christian endurance. Each study focuses on a passage of Scripture.

Small groups, often based in our homes, have long played a vital part in the life and growth of the local church. During the past year many churches have turned to online options such as Zoom to maintain small group fellowship during the pandemic lockdowns.



***'All for Jesus enables us to reflect on genuine discipleship – and reminds us how normal persecution was for New Testament Christians.'***

The *All for Jesus* course is a suitable resource for this format, as it is designed for each member of the group to have their own copy of the booklet. If you are a minister or group

leader you could even get creative, by using Zoom facilities such as Breakout Rooms to discuss a few of the questions at a time, before gathering back together. Each study includes brief background notes on the Bible passage, to help you understand the context, questions for discussion, and suggestions for prayer. There are also notes for group leaders at the back.

If you are a group leader why not speak to your church's leadership about using the *All for Jesus* course in your church's programme this year? The booklets are priced

at £4 each – or just £9 for a pack of ten booklets.

*'All for Jesus enables us to reflect on genuine discipleship – and reminds us how normal persecution was for New Testament Christians,'* says Paul Robinson. *'We commend it to you.'*

**Order your copy of *All for Jesus* by using the enclosed form or call: 01689 823491.**

# Good News

## RIDE ON!

Retired vicar Robert de Berry is organising a fantastic sponsored bike ride next year – and needs many other cyclists and helpers to join him. His target is to raise a massive £250,000 for persecuted Christians, to be divided equally between Release International and CSW.



Robert is inviting sponsored cyclists to join each stage of his ride from North Foreland Point lighthouse, Kent, to Land's End, Cornwall (and back), taking place May 14-June 25, 2022.

**Find out more on p23 and at [releaseinternational.org/BikePilgrimage2022](http://releaseinternational.org/BikePilgrimage2022).**

## PRISONER FREED IN PAKISTAN



**A Christian who spent 11 years in solitary confinement over a false allegation of desecrating the Koran finally walked free in December after a high court overturned his conviction.**

Imran Ghafoor Masih was sentenced to life in prison in January 2010 and fined £650. He was kept in solitary confinement due to threats on his life. We thank God for preserving Imran's life.

Read how Release helps persecuted Christians in Pakistan on page 8.

## 'God brought me peace,' says defector



North Korean defector Mrs Cha (not her real name) – a student at the discipleship school run by our associate ministry VOM Korea – shared recently how for the past five years she has had difficulty sleeping peacefully. Many who have escaped from North Korea have suffered imprisonment or trauma, and remain concerned

for family members still inside the country. At one point, Mrs Cha even contemplated suicide. Now, however, she says that God has brought her peace and freedom to share her testimony with others. Read more about North Korea on page 16.

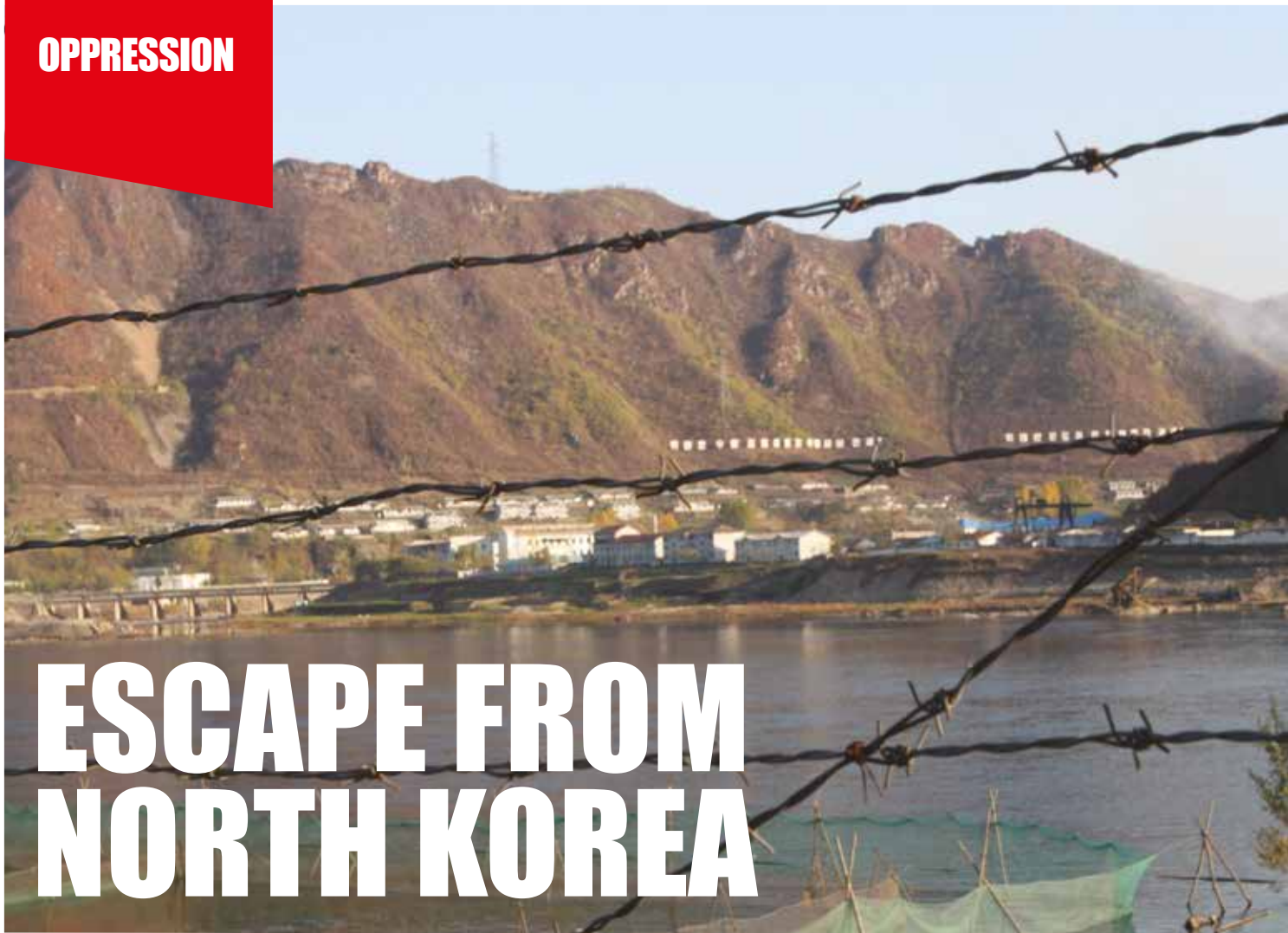
## Amy's art sale raises £700!

Amy from Miss-D Murals in Orpington, Kent, has donated an amazing £700 from her recent art sale to Release.

*'I chose to do this because all of us who belong to Jesus are family,' she said. 'When they hurt, we hurt. I can't physically stand with my brothers and sisters, but this money can help to support them and those who are working with and for them.'*

What a generous and creative expression of love for her persecuted family! Check out Amy's great artwork at [missdmurals.co.uk](http://missdmurals.co.uk).





# ESCAPE FROM NORTH KOREA

*After surviving six years in a labour camp, widow Minji defected to neighbouring China – only to be detained once more. Yet it was in prison that she came to understand the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ.*

When North Korean authorities caught Minji selling South Korean DVDs to earn extra money in 2008, her husband, Kun-woo, feared for his life.

As a high-ranking member of North Korea's State Security Department (SSD), he knew his wife's crime, which was punishable by death, could implicate him, too.

To delay his capture and potentially save his teenage children, Kun-woo fled to China. Meanwhile, Minji's relatives, also SSD officials, took in the children and bribed those who oversaw her case to reduce her sentence. Instead of death, she received a prison sentence.

Kun-woo returned to North Korea

following Minji's release from prison – but he was not the same man she remembered. He could not stop talking about a book called the Bible and a being named God who hears our prayers. A family he met in China had told him about the good news of Jesus Christ, whom he now followed.

*'I thought he was crazy,'* Minji told our partner.

Kun-woo even started praying with people outside the family. In North Korea, neighbours are required to spy on each other, so Christians must pray in secret. And sharing the gospel is even more dangerous than prayer: a simple mention of Jesus Christ can lead to arrest. *'I think he shared with at least 20 people,'* Minji said.

Eventually, someone reported his activities. One night, authorities came to the couple's home and arrested them, and Kun-woo was immediately taken to one of the country's concentration camps.

Christians in North Korea are routinely sent to concentration camps, where they are starved, overworked and tortured. It is estimated that about 30,000 Christians currently suffer in this way. Minji believes her husband died in the camp, though she has no details.

At the time of the arrests, Minji's uncle, who held a chief position with the SSD, knew that she was also in danger of being sent to a concentration camp because of her





One of Minji's cellmates wrote 'Jesus Christ' on the prison wall, using toothpaste, before sharing the gospel (photo re-enactment).

Someone had reported them to the police as possible human traffickers. 'Because we had no proof of citizenship or visa, we were taken to prison.' This was to be her home for the next two years.

'The hardest part was not knowing whether I would be sent back to North Korea or if I would be able to defect to South Korea. It was very stressful,' she recalls.

***'The first time I read the Bible, it felt odd – my husband was killed because of the Bible.'***

While in prison, Minji was befriended by a North Korean woman, who on one occasion used her toothpaste to write 'Jesus Christ' on the prison wall. 'It was my first time to see these words, and I asked her what it was. She began to share with me what Christianity is.'

The Chinese guards had allowed the woman to bring a Bible into prison with her, which she began reading with Minji. 'The first time I read the Bible, it felt odd – my husband was killed because of the Bible.'

Encouraged by other Christian women in the prison, she decided to place her faith in Jesus. 'I had received so much grace from them,' she said. 'I began to wonder about the God who was consistently intervening in my life.'

After her release from prison, Minji contacted family members in South Korea who arranged for her finally to travel to South Korea.

There she joined the Underground

Technology Christian discipleship programme run by our associate ministry, Voice of the Martyrs Korea. Along with other North Korean defectors, she received an academic foundation as well as instruction in life skills, character development, relationship skills and spiritual formation.

'I love the programme because the teachers teach me the Bible,' she said. 'Also, I have never seen any people like [these] students before. I want to follow in my husband's footsteps. I have a heart to follow Jesus like my husband.'

**Thanks to your support, Minji and other defectors are being helped to adapt to life in South Korea, and to grow in their Christian life and faith.**

*Names have been changed*



**Population: 25.8 million**

**Capital: Pyongyang**

**Government type: Totalitarian dictatorship**

**Christian population: 100,000 (estimated)**

*Sources: Operation World, World Factbook.*



**Read more about the courageous faith of persecuted Christian women in *Embrace*, the free newsletter of our Release Women ministry. Request your copy today by calling 01689 823491 or by using the enclosed form.**

husband's Christian faith. So, for her own protection, he had her sent to a less-brutal labour camp where she was more likely to survive.

***'I had to walk for ten hours alone, passing at least five mountains.'***

After more than six years in the camp, Minji was released. She decided to defect to neighbouring China. 'Our family had no future in North Korea after the death of my husband and my own imprisonment,' she said.

She bribed a border guard to allow her and one of her children to cross the Yalu River into China. But after crossing over, her child decided to turn back. On her own, Minji continued walking to a friend who had a car waiting. 'To get there, I had to walk for ten hours alone, passing at least five mountains,' she said.

While in China she and a group of fellow defectors were arrested.



# GROWING IN FAITH

*Your support is helping Somali Christians in Kenya to stand strong, despite oppression and the risk of attacks by militants.*

When Hawa became sick and went to hospital, little did she realise the impact this would have on her life.

There she met a Christian nurse, Elizabeth, who showed her kindness and developed a close friendship with her. Due to the high rate of illiteracy in Hawa's community, many of the women had no education. They were largely unaware of their rights and were often treated badly as a result.

After several conversations, Elizabeth shared with Hawa details of how she had become a Christian and what difference this had made in her life. Intrigued, Hawa wanted to find out more – and the nurse suggested she could discreetly visit the small Christian fellowship she attended.

Because Hawa came from a strict Muslim family, Elizabeth realised that this could be dangerous, so she took great care to make the arrangements.



*Hawa's life was changed when she met a Christian nurse in hospital. Stock photo.*

During this visit, Hawa committed her life to Jesus.

When Hawa's family discovered what had taken place, they told her that she had brought enormous shame to them and their community. Her husband was put under great pressure to divorce her.

***'They constantly feared for their lives'***

She was called names when she walked through the town, and even had stones thrown at her. Her two children also suffered abuse, which progressively grew worse. On one

occasion her home was nearly burned down – but thankfully a police officer discovered the impending attack and warned her so that she and her children could escape.

They constantly feared for their lives and could not trust anyone in their local community. Attempts were even made to poison their food. In these distressing circumstances, Hawa's church became her family and her lifeline.

### ***'We want to give people hope that there is life after Covid'***

In the end, with help from the church, her two children were sent to a Christian boarding school in a safer region – but even so her son, Yusaf, still feared for his mother while he was away. Today though, she can testify to God's goodness and blessing.

After his schooling, Yusaf went on to study theology at university and trained in media and digital work. He is now married, a father of five children and a church leader. He serves God, his community and disciples believers from a Muslim background, most of whom face the same pressures experienced by his own family.

In recent months Yusaf, with support from Release, has helped the community learn about Covid through radio and the internet, showing them how they can take action to minimise infection. 'We want to give people hope that there is life after Covid,' he said.

Please thank God for Yusaf and the courage of his mother Hawa. Pray that God will protect their family, church and life-giving ministry to their community.

*Names have been changed.*



**Population: 12 million**

**Capital: Mogadishu**

**Government type: Federal parliamentary republic**

**Religion: Sunni Muslim 99.7 per cent; Christian 0.3 per cent**

*Sources: Operation World, World Factbook.*

**To be a Christian in Somalia is to live under constant threat. Believers cannot freely practise their faith, and must follow Jesus in secret.**

## **CONSTANTLY ON THE MOVE**

As a Somali Christian, living in Kenya, Pastor Ethan knows that he must watch out each day for signs of danger.

When Ethan left Islam, he was rejected by his wife's family, who stopped him from seeing both her and their children. In fact even today, some years later, the family still prevents him from seeing his older child.

Moving to another region for safety and to look for work, Ethan grew in faith with the help of our ministry partner. Eventually he started to lead a congregation of believers. He also married again, to Ruth, and together they now have two young children.

However, they remain constantly on the move, and at night Ruth sometimes wakes to look out of the window. Just recently, for example, she noticed that she was being

followed home. Ethan knew it was time – again – to move home to avoid a potential attack by militants.

Today a small cell church of about ten people meets in their home each week, where they study the Bible, share communion and enjoy fellowship. He also travels to different villages in the area to comfort and disciple new believers.

### ***'At school his children have sometimes been called names.'***

Ethan is prepared for the long haul, knowing that his family faces many other pressures. For example, at school his children have sometimes been called names because their parents no longer follow Islam.

Ruth sometimes suffers anxiety, and says she would like to move to another country to avoid the constant threat of persecution. However, their small congregation is growing, and, by the grace of God, Ethan now has a small business that helps to support their ministry.



*Pastor Ethan leads a small cell church in his home. Stock photo.*

## **Please pray**

- **that God will comfort Ruth, filling her with hope. Pray for restful sleep at night.**
- **for guidance for Pastor Ethan as he secretly visits other believers.**
- **that the children of converts can go to school, without being ostracised.**
- **that Ethan and Ruth will remain steadfast in their pursuit of God's love and His presence.**

*Names have been changed.*

**RELEASE  
AND YOUR  
CHURCH**

# ALL OUT FOR GOD



**You and your church can show solidarity with persecuted Christians by taking part in this year's All Out for God event (formerly Great Outdoors Church Service) on Sunday, May 30.**

This year we're asking you simply to open your door and walk outside to pray – but with one difference! Many of our persecuted brothers and sisters

walk a tough road and to show our solidarity with them in their walk of life we're asking you to leave your shoes behind and go out barefoot!

As you walk around outside in step with those Christians who are in need because they are followers of Jesus, take a moment to feel the hard path or the soft grass on your feet and give thanks for all the material benefits we

have – while lifting up in prayer those of our family in greatest need.

And when you've finished please do take a photo of your favourite shoes and post with a short prayer message for persecuted Christians on our Facebook page with hashtag #A04G. For each picture we would also encourage you to donate £5 or £10 or whatever you are able to give to Release's work supporting persecuted Christians.



*'Come rain or shine I really hope you will be able to join us this year and show your solidarity with our persecuted family around the world,'* said Paul Robinson, Release CEO.

**Find out more at: [releaseinternational.org/all-out-for-god](https://releaseinternational.org/all-out-for-god)**

## IF PRISON WALLS COULD SPEAK

*The exciting new tour by Artless Theatre Company launches later this year. Could your church be a venue?*

*If Prison Walls Could Speak* is a new drama based on Petr Jasek's powerful account of his experience in jail in Sudan, as told in his recent book *Imprisoned with ISIS*.

The tour will take place in around 100 churches in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, starting in September or October 2021 (to be confirmed) and continuing until the end of 2022.

*'We are delighted to partner with Artless Theatre Company in this exciting project,'* said Release's Director of Engagement, Laura Hayes.



*'We are at draft script stage and are now looking for churches throughout the UK who are willing to host a performance. We've already been in contact with nearly 30 churches, but would like many more to join in. This is a unique opportunity to raise the profile of persecuted Christians throughout the UK.'*

**NEW  
DRAMA  
TOUR**

**JOIN THE TOUR!** Please discuss with your church leaders if your church could host a performance. Email Laura at [lhayes@releaseinternational.org](mailto:lhayes@releaseinternational.org) to find out more.



## THE WORD

**The death and resurrection of Jesus bring hope – today and forever – to Christians who suffer in prison because of their faith, writes Development Manager Imtiaz.**

# HOPE IN THE PRISON CELL

Have you ever wondered what it is like for prisoners of faith to be in jail? During this Covid-19 pandemic it is even more difficult and lonely.

It is not easy for falsely accused Christian prisoners in Pakistan, who often endure overcrowded cells and brutal treatment.

Over the years I have visited many Christian prisoners there and seen the sadness and the distress of these believers as they suffer physically and mentally. Two of the things that give them hope are their Christian faith and visitors who encourage them through prayer and inspiring words.

One prisoner I visited shared his testimony of being falsely accused of blasphemy. As he spoke to me, I could see in his face his deep longing to be free.

He asked for people to pray for him to be released. In the midst of all the difficulties he faced, I knew that he was only able to cope in prison because of his faith in God – and by knowing and experiencing God's own strength.

***'I realised how important it is for Christian prisoners to have family and friends visit them, love them and share God's Word with them.'***

As I prayed for him, holding his hands, I saw the tears in his eyes. My heart was very moved and I found it hard to express my prayers – but thanks be to God I was able to pray. This brother also prayed, but with a broken

heart. He told me that he was really encouraged by our visit and prayers.

I realised how important it is for Christian prisoners to have family and friends visit them, love them and share God's Word with them.



Some prisoners, when they are released from prison, need protection from the community they have to go back to. In the end, most have to leave their homes and find refuge elsewhere.

As we approach Easter, we are mindful of the acute pain and anguish that our Saviour endured in order to bring us peace. As the prophet

Isaiah foresaw: 'He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain' (Isaiah 53:3, NIV).

Please pray for Christian prisoners of faith in Pakistan who this Easter find themselves in prison on false allegations of blasphemy. Pray for their mental and physical health and having to cope with the injustice and loneliness.

Please also pray that each would know and experience God's comfort and the peace that Jesus gives through His sacrificial death and resurrection.

I have to keep reminding these brave believers that the Lord Jesus cares for the oppressed – and that one day they will be with the Lord, when there will be no more tears, sorrow or death.

## INVITE A RELEASE SPEAKER

**Imtiaz is one of our team of Development Managers in the UK and Ireland who are available to join your church or online meeting to help you support persecuted Christians (see page 21).**

## INSPIRING FAITH



***'It was not nails that kept Jesus on the cross, but His love for me.'***

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.

# PLEASE SUPPORT ROBERT'S BIKE PILGRIMAGE 2022

Retired vicar Robert de Berry is undertaking a 900-mile sponsored bike ride for persecuted Christians between May 14-June 25, 2022 – and needs your help!



## ROUTE: NORTH FORELAND POINT LIGHTHOUSE, KENT, TO LAND'S END, CORNWALL – AND BACK!

Robert will be speaking in local churches along the way and aims to raise £250,000 through sponsorship. He hopes to achieve this by recruiting ten whole journey riders each raising £3,000 or more, and ten stage riders each day, each raising £500 or more. The total will be divided equally between Release International and CSW.

- To join the ride for the whole distance, or the day the ride goes through your area email: [info@releaseinternational.org](mailto:info@releaseinternational.org).
- To offer overnight B&B to one of the whole journey riders, email: [info@releaseinternational.org](mailto:info@releaseinternational.org).
- To sponsor this wonderful initiative and to find out more, visit: [releaseinternational.org/BikePilgrimage2022](http://releaseinternational.org/BikePilgrimage2022)

**ROBERT'S ROUTE** ♦ North Foreland Point Lighthouse ♦ Canterbury ♦ Maidstone ♦ Orpington ♦ Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells ♦ Redhill and Cheam ♦ North Holmwood ♦ Godalming ♦ Cranleigh ♦ Winchester ♦ Salisbury ♦ Sherborne ♦ Taunton ♦ Barnstaple ♦ Bude ♦ Newquay ♦ Hayle ♦ Penzance ♦ Truro ♦ St Austell ♦ Plymouth ♦ Exeter ♦ Seaton ♦ Axminster ♦ Dorchester ♦ Bournemouth ♦ Southampton ♦ Portsmouth ♦ Chichester ♦ Worthing ♦ Brighton ♦ Eastbourne ♦ Hastings ♦ Ashford ♦ Folkestone ♦ Margate ♦ North Foreland Point Lighthouse

# THE DAY OF THE CHRISTIAN MARTYR

Tuesday, June 29, 2021

Release invites you and your church to join us this year in remembering modern-day Christian martyrs on June 29, 2021.

A FREE resource pack will be available in due course.



☎ 01689 823491 🌐 [releaseinternational.org/martyrs](http://releaseinternational.org/martyrs)

✉ [martyrsday@releaseinternational.org](mailto:martyrsday@releaseinternational.org)

🐦 #IWillNotAbandonThem



# *Will you leave a legacy of enduring faith and love?*



**'Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'**  
*(Matthew 5:10)*

Remembering those who are persecuted in your Will is vital to help Release International continue supporting Christian families in need worldwide.

If you are thinking about making or updating your Will, please contact Paul Jones to request our legacy brochure, or to discuss how your legacy could be used. Email Paul on [pjones@releaseinternational.org](mailto:pjones@releaseinternational.org) or use the enclosed response card.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL  
**voice**  
of Persecuted Christians



releaseinternational.org

# prayershield

April–June 2021



*Members of Zion Church in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, have refused to be cowed by the bomb attack in 2019.*

## APRIL 2021

*Heavenly Father,*

*Your Word is steadfast, Your Truth unassailable.*

*I lift to You, Lord, my persecuted brothers and sisters and ask You to help them to hear Your voice, amid all the noise, uncertainty and confusion.*

*Attune their ear to Your prompting, Your reassurance and Your boundless love.*

*Help us all to hear that 'still small voice' (1 Kings 19:12) and choose to listen only to You. Thank you, Lord, that You hear your flock (John 10:27) and You always respond.*

*In Jesus' name,*

*Amen*

## SRI LANKA

**THURSDAY 1:** Please pray for our Christian family in Sri Lanka as they prepare to mark the second anniversary of the Easter Sunday suicide bombings targeting churches and hotels in Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa.

**GOOD FRIDAY:** As we remember the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, let's remember all those who have died for His name's sake in recent years. Thank God that they are now united with Him in heaven.

**SATURDAY 3:** In the stillness and sadness following Jesus' death, His disciples must have struggled with their sense of loss. Ask God to comfort those

who are still trying to make sense of bereavement and loss as a result of persecution.

**EASTER SUNDAY:** As we celebrate our risen Lord today, let's pray that His resurrection will be made manifest in the lives of those who have suffered for their faith, including our brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka.

**EASTER MONDAY:** Survivors of the Easter Sunday attack on Zion Church, Batticaloa, where 31 people died, resumed

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL  
**voice**  
of Persecuted Christians

worship services the week after the blast. Thank God for their strong faith and courage.

**TUESDAY 6:** Sri Lankan Christians say they have been strengthened by the outpouring of love from the global church following the 2019 attacks. Pray that the global church will be known for the love that binds us together.

**WEDNESDAY 7:** Judges in Sri Lanka recently ordered the release of ten suspects held in connection with the 2019 bombings. Pray for justice for all those who died.

**THURSDAY 8:** Since the Easter Sunday attack on them, members of St Sebastian's Church, Negombo, have held services under armed guard. Pray that Sri Lanka will witness a new era of religious freedom where such protection is not needed.

## CHINA

**FRIDAY 9:** Chinese officials have taken advantage of the pandemic to accelerate their crackdown on the church. Pray that God's people will be strengthened in their faith and draw deeply on His Word.

**SATURDAY 10:** Pray for Pastor Zhang Shaojie of Nanle County Christian Church who has been transferred to a different prison in Henan province to carry out the remaining five years of his 12-year sentence for alleged fraud.

**SUNDAY 11:** In jail Pastor Zhang (above) has suffered various abuses, including being denied access to proper



*God's Word is changing lives and His kingdom is advancing in China.*

food and being subjected to 'concentrated education'. Ask God to strengthen and uphold prisoners of faith in China such as Zhang.

**MONDAY 12:** Pray for 'Li Wei', his wife and children who were evicted from three apartments during the pandemic in China last year – simply because of their faith in Jesus. Their landlords had been pressured by Communist party members.

**TUESDAY 13:** Praise God for the strong faith of Li Wei's wife (above). When their water and power were cut off, she said: 'We are forced to live in darkness. But our hearts are full of... the light that comes from God's Word.'

**WEDNESDAY 14:** Ask God to protect members of the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu. More than 200 members have been arrested since 2018, including Pastor Wang Yi.

**THURSDAY 15:** China has developed a powerful system of digital surveillance, with more than half a billion cameras installed. Praise God that in contrast His eyes 'range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to Him' (2 Chronicles 16:9).

## ERITREA

**FRIDAY 16:** Please continue to pray that God will sustain Christians behind bars in Eritrea. Thank God that a number were released last year, including some who had been held for a decade or more.

**SATURDAY 17:** Some refugees, including Christians, in camps in the Tigray region of Ethiopia may have been forcibly repatriated to Eritrea during the recent conflict. Ask God to protect them.

**SUNDAY 18:** Many Christians who had fled persecution in Eritrea had settled in Ethiopia

and have now been displaced again by the recent conflict in Tigray. Pray that God will provide a home for them.

**MONDAY 19:** Thank God that 70 evangelical and Orthodox believers were released from prison in Eritrea in February, including some who had been behind bars for 12 years.

## NORTH KOREA

**TUESDAY 20:** Christians in North Korea have viewed Covid-19 as an opportunity. Our partners say that 'this has been the most creative year we have witnessed in the underground church to date'. Praise God!

**WEDNESDAY 21:** Thank God that, despite Covid-19 restrictions in 2020, our partners were able to distribute double the number of Bibles for North Korean Christians as they did the previous year.

**THURSDAY 22:** Stand with our partners serving North Korea in this prayer: 'Pray that the bold, patient Spirit of Christ which we see active in our underground church partners will be at work in us also.'

**FRIDAY 23:** Pray that God will bless His people in North Korea with the grace they need to stand. Thank God that His grace is all sufficient to enable them to 'abound in every good work' (2 Corinthians 9:8).

## CENTRAL ASIA

**SATURDAY 24:** Christians are routinely oppressed in Central Asia where, for example, evangelism is banned. Pray that God will breathe His Spirit

afresh into the church in this region this year.

**SUNDAY 25:** Churches must register with the authorities in order to have permission to meet. In Kyrgyzstan, the authorities demand a minimum church membership of 200. Pray that God will protect smaller churches from scrutiny.

**MONDAY 26:** In registering, churches often have to provide personal details about their members. Pray that this information does not fall into the hands of criminals or Islamist extremists.

**TUESDAY 27:** Continue to pray for the Christian workers Release supports in this region. Pray that through their ministry the church in the region will grow and bear much fruit.

**WEDNESDAY 28:** Citizens from outside Central Asia are forbidden to take part in Christian meetings in the region. During the pandemic, officials have banned visits by foreign Christian workers. Pray that churches will not become isolated.

**THURSDAY 29:** Pray that improvements in religious freedom in Uzbekistan last year will continue. Pray specifically that the evangelical churches which were officially registered in 2020 will grow rapidly.

**FRIDAY 30:** Praise God that churches have been allowed to register in Karakalpakstan, an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan, where, until now, there has not been a single registered church.

## MAY 2021

### IRAN

**SATURDAY 1:** Persecution is reportedly on the increase in Iran as the authorities are determined to stop further growth of the house church movement. Pray the church will grow unimpeded.

**SUNDAY 2:** Pray for a dozen or so believers with a Muslim background in Karaj who have reportedly been summoned to intelligence offices recently and ordered to stop meeting. They have refused to comply.

**MONDAY 3:** Ask God to protect Ebrahim Firouzi who was arrested then released on bail in February after making films publicising continual harassment by Iranian intelligence. He has been in enforced exile in southern Iran.

**TUESDAY 4:** Pray that Ebrahim Firouzi's films and his courage



*Courageous personal evangelism means people continue to turn to Christ in Iran.*

will help highlight religious rights abuses and help bring about greater religious freedom.

**WEDNESDAY 5:** Pray for brothers Sam and Sasan Khosravi, and Habib Heydari, who recently lost their appeal against a one-year prison sentence. The brothers also face an additional sentence of two years in exile.

**THURSDAY 6:** Sam Khosravi (above) and his wife Maryam lost their appeal against a ruling they were 'unfit' to retain custody of their adopted daughter, Lydia, because of their faith. Pray that God will find a way to reunite this family soon.

**'Pray not for my acquittal but for the great name of God to be glorified.'**

*Ebrahim Firouzi, Iranian Christian, on his arrest in February*



**FRIDAY 7:** Iran has seen an exodus of believers and Christian workers. Pray that the move to online church activities will make it easier for believers to enjoy fellowship and halt the exodus.

## PAKISTAN

**SATURDAY 8:** Haroon Ayub Masih and Salamat Mansha Masih have been charged with blasphemy after being seen studying the Bible together in a park in Lahore. Pray charges will be dropped.

**SUNDAY 9:** Pray for justice for Christian nurse Tabitha Nazir Gill who has been charged with blasphemy after a dispute at work. She challenged a colleague over unethical practices, only to be beaten and falsely accused by other staff members.

**MONDAY 10:** Pray for justice for Christian labourer Saleem Masih, 22, killed by landowners who accused him of 'polluting' their well near Lahore by washing in it. Two suspects recently freed on bail have reportedly issued death threats to pressure Saleem's family to drop the case.

**TUESDAY 11:** Police in Kasur are alleged to have witnessed Saleem's torture (above), and tried to pass it off as an 'accident'. Pray that the justice system in Pakistan will be rid of discrimination.

**WEDNESDAY 12:** Continue to pray for teenager Arzoo Raja. The High Court in November reversed its decision to

validate her marriage to a Muslim who is alleged to have abducted and forcibly converted her. Please pray that Arzoo will be returned to her family soon.

**THURSDAY 13:** Pray for a 12-year-old Christian girl who was found chained up in the Faisalabad home of a man her family accuses of kidnap and forced conversion. They fear the man will be acquitted after she testified in court that she had married of her own free will.

**FRIDAY 14:** Church leaders are concerned that government-run refuges where girls such as the 12-year-old above are taken are brainwashing and intimidating them so they refuse to testify against their attackers. Pray for protection and for justice for these girls.

**SATURDAY 15:** Pray for the family of two Christian sisters, Sajida Mushtaq and Abida Qaiser, whose employers in Lahore had allegedly pressured them to convert to Islam. The women were recently found dead.

**SUNDAY 16:** The provincial government of Punjab is considering legislation which would criminalise the forced conversion of Christian women and girls. Pray that this Bill will be passed – and replicated in other provinces.

**MONDAY 17:** Pray for the family of Sonia Bibi who was shot and killed in Rawalpindi after refusing to renounce Christ.

**TUESDAY 18:** Please pray for Zafar Bhatti, who has been in prison since 2012. Ask God to



*Nawab Bibi has spent eight years alone since her husband Zafar was convicted of blasphemy.*

provide for him and his wife, Nawab Bibi (pictured), and fill them both with His peace.

**WEDNESDAY 19:** Thank God for a recent High Court ruling that overturned Imran Ghafoor Masih's conviction for 'blasphemy'. Imran spent nearly 11 years in solitary confinement over a false allegation of desecrating the Koran.

**THURSDAY 20:** Pray that God will provide a secure home and supportive community for Imran (above). An allegation of blasphemy is enough to prompt extremists to try to kill the accused, even after an acquittal.

## ALGERIA

**FRIDAY 21:** Pray that the authorities in Algeria will allow the reopening of 13 churches which have remained forcibly closed since November 2017.

**SATURDAY 22:** All Protestant churches remained closed due to the pandemic, even after some mosques and other churches were permitted to reopen. Pray that religious freedoms will be upheld for all faiths and denominations in Algeria.

**SUNDAY 23:** At Pentecost, let's ask God to fill His persecuted people afresh with His Holy Spirit so that persecutors, detractors and doubters will be touched by His peace and His presence, in Algeria and worldwide.

**MONDAY 24:** Pray for a father-of-four sentenced to five years in jail for 'blasphemy' after sharing a caricature of Islam's prophet Mohammed on social media. He plans to appeal.

**TUESDAY 25:** Pray for two Algerian Christians from Kabylie who were also recently convicted of blasphemy under similar

circumstances to the believer in yesterday's prayer. They were sentenced to six months and three years respectively.

**WEDNESDAY 26:** Ask God to grant wisdom and peace to church leaders in Algeria amid continued pressure on the church.

## UGANDA

**THURSDAY 27:** Pray for Pastor Moses Nabwana and his wife, Naura, who were viciously attacked twice in response to an imam in their community becoming a Christian. Praise God that relatives intervened during the second attack, causing their attackers to flee.

**FRIDAY 28:** Please pray for the former imam who became a Christian in Moses and Naura's area. Pray that God will use his testimony to draw many others to Christ.

**SATURDAY 29:** Pray for Mansitula from Obutete village, eastern Uganda, who suffered a miscarriage after her husband attacked her. He was enraged after she became a Christian.

**SUNDAY 30:** As Christians in the UK pray outside today in our **All Out for God** event, please pray for Christians in Uganda and worldwide who cannot practise their faith in freedom.

**MONDAY 31:** Continue to pray for two teenagers, 'Shamil' and 'Joshua', who have resolved to follow Christ even after their father beat them.

JUNE 2021

## INDIA

**TUESDAY 1:** Police failed to stop a fierce attack by Hindu extremists on Heavenly Gospel Mission Church in Uttar Pradesh. Officers then beat and arrested the Christians on suspicion of forced conversion. Pray for justice for this congregation.

**WEDNESDAY 2:** Pray for Leela Bai, who miscarried eight months into her pregnancy after she was attacked by Hindu extremists in Dewada, Madhya Pradesh. She had tried to intervene when the mob began attacking other Christians.

**THURSDAY 3:** Pray for justice for the tribal Christians whom Hindu extremists attacked in Dewada (above), accusing them of forced conversion. Local police allegedly tried to dissuade them from pressing charges.

**FRIDAY 4:** Hospitals allegedly refused to treat Leela Bai (above) after her miscarriage because militants had apparently put pressure on them. Pray for an end to the collusion and fear that leave Christians isolated.

**SATURDAY 5:** Pray for justice for three Indian nationals and a South Korean Christian accused of 'fraudulent conversion' in Uttar Pradesh. The four were arrested in December after distributing food to those badly affected by coronavirus restrictions.

**SUNDAY 6:** The case registered against the four people in Uttar Pradesh (see yesterday) was the first in the district to be brought under the state's tough new anti-conversion laws. Pray that this newly enacted legislation is not used to persecute non-Hindus.

**MONDAY 7:** Madhya Pradesh has recently introduced a tough new law intended to deter Hindus from changing their religion – the harshest anti-conversion law yet to be passed in India. Pray for Christians there who, it is feared, will be targeted in abuses of this law.

**TUESDAY 8:** Pastor Devendhrappa Lamani was hospitalised after tribal animists assaulted him in Abbigeri village, Karnataka state. A mob also attacked him in January. They made false accusations of sexual assault against him because of his faith.

**WEDNESDAY 9:** Pastor Lamani (above) had burned Bibles and insulted Christians before he heard the gospel at 17 and became a Christian. Stand with him in praying for his persecutors: 'We are confident that the Lord will turn them towards Him.'

**THURSDAY 10:** Pray for six Christian families in Chichima village, Odisha, whose church was attacked by a mob, angry that they had turned their back on tribal religion. They were threatened with eviction if they reported the matter to the police.



*'Saratu' lost her husband and her home at the hands of extremists in Nigeria.*

**FRIDAY 11:** Hindu nationalists are reportedly visiting villages in Odisha to enforce the message that tribal people are Hindus, even if they practise animistic rituals, and stirring up ill will towards Christians.

**SATURDAY 12:** Pray for Christians in Kondagaon, Chhattisgarh state, who are said still to be living in fear after a 3,000-strong mob damaged Christian homes in three villages last year.

## LAOS

**SUNDAY 13:** Pray for the safe return of Pastor Sithong Theppavong from a farming area of Savannakhet province. He was arrested in March 2020 after receiving repeated warnings to cease his ministry. His wife has faced harassment.

**MONDAY 14:** Pray for several Christian families



in northern Laos who are refusing to leave their village, despite hostility from local residents who are pressuring them to return to ancestor worship.

**TUESDAY 15:** Pray for justice for one of the Christians in northern Laos (above) whose land has been taken over by illegal loggers. When he submitted a formal complaint, the village official said: 'Letting you Christians [stay] in this village is a waste of land here.'

**WEDNESDAY 16:** Christians in Laos are often excluded from distributions of practical support such as food. Pray that God will provide for them through His church.

## KENYA

**THURSDAY 17:** Pray for believers in parts of Kenya with a strong Muslim majority. In eastern Kenya,

*al-Shabaab* extremists target Christians: churches have been bombed and believers killed.

**FRIDAY 18:** Five church buildings in the village of Otamba were attacked by suspected arsonists in Kisii county over five days in January. Pray for justice and full reparations for these church communities.

**SATURDAY 19:** Church members in Otamba (above) were reportedly afraid to attend open-air services held after the attacks in January. Pray that God will strengthen believers so they can enjoy fellowship again.

**SUNDAY 20:** Please pray that government leaders in Kenya will take a firm stance against the Islamist extremism which has taken root in parts of north and east Kenya.

## NIGERIA

**MONDAY 21:** Pray for 'Saratu' (pictured) whose husband was murdered by *Boko Haram* extremists and her home destroyed. She managed to escape to safety with her terrified children, and is receiving support from our partner Stefanos Foundation.

**TUESDAY 22:** Pastor Polycarp Zongo from Jos in Plateau state was abducted by Islamist militants in October. Contrary to reports of his release, including in the last *Prayer Shield*, it is believed Polycarp is still being held captive. Pray for his release.

**WEDNESDAY 23:** Takulashi, a mainly Christian village near Chibok, Borno state, was attacked by *Boko Haram* militants in November. They killed 12 Christians, including a pastor, and kidnapped three women and four children. Pray for restoration and healing for this community.

**THURSDAY 24:** Of the 276 girls that *Boko Haram* kidnapped from a school in Chibok in April 2014, 112 are believed still to be in captivity. Pray for their release.

**FRIDAY 25:** Please pray for the release of two Christian women and a six-year-old boy, Isaiah Okunu, abducted from Nasarawa town last year. Their kidnappers killed Isaiah's father.

**SATURDAY 26:** Militant Fulani herdsman burned down a building in Zonzon, Kaduna state, just days before a Christian conference was due to be hosted there. Pray that a new venue will be found and the conference can be reconvened.

**SUNDAY 27:** Pray for the families of two church leaders killed in Niger state recently: Rev John Gbaakan Yaji of St Anthony's parish in Gulu and Pastor Jeremiah Ibrahim who led an evangelical church in Kobwa Kuta.

**MONDAY 28:** Praise God for the release of Professor John Fatokun of Anchor University in Lagos. Fulani militants captured him as he travelled



*Naomi finds solace and strength in prayer after years of hardship in Nigeria.*

from Jos to Nasarawa state. ‘My faith remains unshakeable,’ Prof Fatokun said.

**TUESDAY 29:** Praise God for the overcoming faith of Naomi (pictured). Widowed young, she and her five children were forced to flee their home in Borno state after *Boko Haram* attacked. They spent two years living rough, then as refugees in Cameroon, before returning

to Nigeria. Release associate ministries now support them in Plateau state.

**WEDNESDAY 30:** Pray that the international community will wake up to the persecution of Christians in Nigeria, rather than dismissing the violence as land disputes, and put pressure on the Nigerian Government to take firm action.

*Lord Jesus,  
You are love incarnate, love divine. You never fail me, Your love never falters.*

*Lord, please overwhelm my dear brothers and sisters today with Your limitless, unconditional love that drives out fear and dispels hatred.*

*May Your love, alive and at work in Your church, silence the accuser. May it cause the persecutor, the objector, the oppressor, to wonder, to question and to draw near to You.*

*Amen*

Sources: China Aid; International Christian Concern; Middle East Concern; Morning Star News; Release partners and contacts; VOM Canada; VOM USA.

Names in inverted commas have been changed to protect identities.

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

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